

A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a green dress, is sitting on a yellow sofa and reading an open book. She is positioned in front of a large window with lace curtains. Outside the window, a garden with a fountain and trees is visible. The title 'No Sister to Beguile' is written in a large, elegant, black cursive font across the top of the image.

No Sister to Beguile

*Two hearts
determined
to keep their
distance.*

Sherton Sisters Book Five

WENDY MAY ANDREWS

A Sister
to
Beguile

Wendy May Andrews



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Two nobles convinced love has no place in their future—until their hearts get involved.

Lady Graciela Sherton, the Earl of Sherton's youngest daughter, shares none of her sisters' ambitions for love or marriage—much to her mother's chagrin. She is happy to spend the rest of her days at her family's estate, steadfast in her conviction that boring is better. That is, until a threat to her family forces her from her complacent comfort zone.

Lord Alexander Sterling has no intention of marrying. Society might claim he needs an heir, but he'd rather die alone than subject another generation to a childhood like his own. Lady Grace is merely the inconvenient sister-in-law of the duke he is determined to do business with, until her calm nature and generous spirit have him realizing there may be more behind her pretty face.

When Grace and Alex team up to uncover a saboteur threatening the duke's business, their own preconceived plans for the future are challenged by the conflicted feelings between them. They are both determined to keep their distance, but it's getting harder to remember why.

A Sister to Beguile is a clean standalone Regency romance with perfect chemistry, memorable characters, a hint of intrigue, and a satisfying happy ending.

Dedication

In *A Sister to Beguile* Grace thinks she's the boring sister and has no intention of setting out on an adventure. But then she proves to herself and everyone else that she can do whatever needs doing. That is true of everyone. So this book is dedicated to everyone out there who's surprising themselves with what they can accomplish.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, Mr. Andrews deserves to be recognized for his constant support of my writing and life in general. It feels like he knows the Sherton sisters almost as well as I do, even though he hasn't read this manuscript yet. And he's always kind enough to order pizza when the need arises or take me out for a walk when I've been sitting for far too long.

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My gorgeous cover is thanks to the artistry of *Envision Literary Photography* and *Verdeli Design & Illustration*. I'm thrilled with the results of this new collaboration.

We've had a new editor join our team, Jenny Proctor of *Midnight Owl Editing*. I am grateful for her input. The characters' goals and motivations have certainly deepened with her help.

And as always, my lovely editor, Julie Sherwood, helped me iron out the kinks in this story, including the final timeline, and put in all the commas. Any remaining mistakes are entirely the fault of the author.

Chapter One

Lady Graciela Cecilia Serenity Sherton lay in the grass watching the clouds float by. She was trying quite studiously not to think of anything other than what the shapes put her in mind of. That one quite looked like a sheep. The other one resembled a waterfall. The next one reminded her of dancing with Lord Sterling at her sister's ball.

With a huff of disgust, Grace sat up, bringing an end to her efforts at idyllic cloud gazing.

She couldn't seem to go longer than a few hours without thoughts of the strange earl flitting through her mind. It was possibly because she had recently spent time with him at her sister's wedding, but Gracie didn't think that was it. Merely having been in proximity to someone shouldn't make them stick so firmly in one's thoughts. Or rather, such a thing had never happened to her before.

And she quite hoped it never happened again. It was unnerving having the gentleman forever taking up space in her mind. She hadn't invited him to do so. Really, it was quite rude.

She grinned as she gained her feet, brushing from off her skirts the small twigs and grass particles that couldn't help but accumulate when one takes to spending time on the ground. But really, how else was one to watch the clouds without getting a crick in her neck. Of course, if she had followed the counsel of her maid, she would have brought a blanket with her, but that had seemed like far too much trouble at the time.

Lady Graciela Sherton was the laziest creature of her acquaintance. Not that she was acquainted with all that many people, but each and every one of her four sisters was ambitious in some way or another. Rosabel, older than Grace by more than ten years, had been most anxious to wed. Now a duchess, she worked hard at raising her increasing number of children and helping her husband run his estate, especially while he was tied up with parliamentary matters. Hilaria, next to Bel in birth order and only a year younger, had been determined to marry a duke but had ended up delighted with her viscount. Her ambitions had been fierce, and she now spent all that energy on her husband's career even while being heavily involved with the raising of their own small brood. Vicky, the youngest of the older sisters, but still older than Grace by seven years, hadn't been ambitious in the same way. Instead, she had kept herself busy keeping the peace at home until she had ended up happily married to a lovely

gentleman, who had charmed his way right into Vicky's heart. The happy couple seemed to be ever traveling, dividing their time between various countries.

Grace shuddered at the very thought. If you asked her, they were quite unhinged to traipse about the globe in such a carefree fashion. Grace was well aware that her last sister Felicity would have been pea green with envy of Vigilia's wanderings if not for her satisfaction with her own duke, who allowed her to pursue her thirst for knowledge without interruption.

Gracie was happy for them all, she truly was, but she had absolutely no intention of imitating any of them in the least. She would be quite content remaining at home on her father's estate, slowly turning into a spinster. She didn't even mind the word spinster. Grace quite liked the sounds that went into the word. Her only wish was that she could have it apply to her already. But seeing as she had only just turned nineteen, it was unlikely anyone would accept her as a spinster just yet. Surely though, everyone could see that it was in the family's best interests for her to remain at home. With the baby viscount, Augustus, not even three years old, she ought to stay unwed just in case he was in want of care at some point.

It wasn't even that she was opposed to the Season as Felicity had been. Grace just couldn't see the point. She didn't wish to wed. It wasn't that she didn't want a noble husband, or didn't want a common husband, as some of her sisters had felt. She just didn't have a particular use for *any* husband. She was perfectly content with life at Glendale. Since all the other girls had left and their mother was happily preoccupied with her toddling son, Lady Sherton had allowed Graciela to take over some of her duties. Not so many as to become onerous for Lady Grace, but enough that she felt sufficiently occupied and not in the least inclined to leave.

It didn't even particularly bother Grace that this meant she was the laziest creature in the family. Someone needed to occupy that role. She grinned. Why on earth would she give up a perfectly comfortable existence for the sake of a man?

She had little experience in the matter, of course, having only recently gained a brother. But from what she could see of her brothers-in-law, there wasn't that much to pull her toward the role of wife, especially not the wife of a member of the upper reaches of Society or a large landowner. Since she was fully cognizant of her laziness, she was also fully convinced that she wouldn't care for being wed to a poor man, either. Remaining the comfortably pampered youngest daughter of the Earl of Sherton was exactly where she wished to remain.

So, why did that pesky Lord Sterling keep creeping into her mind

at the most inopportune times? It was most disconcerting. And it wasn't just happening while she was daydreaming.

Just that morning while visiting Mrs. Jenkins, Grace had been trying quite diligently to pay attention as the older woman had been explaining her latest ailment, slowly. Grace's mind had drifted and before she knew it, all she could see in her mind's eye was Lord Sterling's amused smile as he had shared a joke with her at Felicity's wedding. She was quite certain he would find Mrs. Jenkins's description highly amusing.

In her imagination, Grace deliberately turned her back on Lord Sterling and his persistent appearances in her mind while offering Mrs. Jenkins an encouraging smile. It would not do to offend the poor woman. She was a dreadful gossip and would like nothing better than to tell the neighbourhood that one of the Sherton girls had been rude to her. When the older woman had finally slowed down in her recitation, Gracie had stepped into the conversation.

"I'm so sorry to hear you've been feeling poorly, my good woman. I am most certain our housekeeper has the perfect thing for that, as she is forever mixing different tinctures for all our ailments. Would you like me to bring you some tomorrow?"

"Oh, my dear Lady Graciela, that is so very kind of you," Mrs. Jenkins had said. "I would never want to put you out so, but seeing as you are offering, I would certainly be appreciative."

Gracie had done her best to hide her amusement, merely smiling and nodding at the other woman. "Of course. I'd be happy to bring it by. Tomorrow, then?"

The memory brought a sigh to Gracie's lips. She had forgotten to speak to the housekeeper. She had best do that before she forgot again. With one last twitch of her skirts, she righted her appearance and headed back toward the house.

She was just entering the front entry when she encountered the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Williams, I was just on my way to find you. How fortuitous."

The housekeeper looked a little sceptical about Grace's word choice, but she smiled and nodded anyway. "Wasn't that convenient, as I was looking for you."

The servant's words hardly registered so determined Grace was to stick to her own purpose, lest she forget.

"I called on Mrs. Jenkins today, and she is in dreadful need of one of your potions. I'm sorry that I committed you without asking, but I told her I would come by tomorrow with something to help her."

"That's no trouble at all, my dear. I'd be happy to help. Is it her arthritis acting up again?"

Grace wrinkled her nose. "I believe so, Mrs. Williams, but she had a great many ailments to discuss, so I'm not completely certain."

The older woman smiled and nodded. "Leave it with me, my dear, and I'll have something for you to deliver tomorrow first thing. Perhaps, we could mention your visit to Cook, and he can make up something for you to take as well."

"Oh, thank you for mentioning that. I might not have thought of that on my own. I will speak to him right away," Grace replied politely but inwardly groaned. She ought to have thought of that. If her mind hadn't been in the clouds, she might have done so. She was about to hurry away when the housekeeper's next words stopped her in her tracks.

"Oh, Lady Grace, before you run off, I was coming to fetch you, as you have a caller."

Grace blinked and blushed, remembering that the housekeeper had mentioned she was seeking her out. Of course, she'd had a purpose for doing so.

"My apologies, you did mention you were looking for me, and I completely missed your point. Who is calling?" She glanced down at her gown and then asked, "Ought I to change first? Have they been waiting long?"

"Your mother is with him now, but he did ask to see you. A Lord Sterling is here."

Gracie stared at the life-long familiar servant as though she had never seen her before, wondering if she were stuck in a nightmare.

Did I conjure the man with my thoughts of him?

She smiled weakly at the housekeeper. Her questions hadn't really been answered, and she had to decide on the instant. She glanced down at her frock once more. It wasn't dreadful. It wasn't the most fashionable thing she owned, but it was comfortable and one of her favourite colours. And even though she had been lying in the grass, she was reasonably sure she wasn't dirty.

"Mrs. Williams, a moment, please. Could you please confirm for me whether or not there are grass stains on my back?"

The servant laughed and dutifully checked.

"You are perfectly presentable, my lady, but if you'd prefer to run up to your room, I can make your excuses."

Gracie bit her lip in indecision. "How long did you say he'd already been here?"

"Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes?"

"Oh dear, and with Mother this whole time?"

The servant nodded, and Grace grinned. "Perhaps, that will prevent a repeat performance. But I ought to go see for myself. Thank you, Mrs. Williams."

Grace took another critical glance down at the skirt of her gown and weighed her options. Would her mother be more distressed that she wasn't dressed in her best or that she had left her to attend a guest on her own? Gracie was well aware that her mother's ambitions for her daughters were unlimited, so she might not mind being left alone with the eligibly single lord. But Gracie didn't want to have her engagement to the man negotiated before she had even put in an appearance, so she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and marched off toward the receiving room Mrs. Williams had indicated.

Chapter Two

Lord Alexander Sterling stood at the sound of the door opening. He hoped it was Lady Graciela arriving, as he didn't think he would be able to tolerate Lady Sherton much longer. He really should have just asked to see the countess to gain the information he sought instead of requesting an audience with Lady Graciela. Clearly, he hadn't been thinking correctly when he'd thought to visit Glendale. But he'd had horses on his mind, and that seemed to be all he had space for at the moment. Ridiculous for a grown man to be incapable of holding two different thoughts in his mind at once; he chided himself even as he turned toward the door.

Suddenly, horses were the farthest thing from his mind. Lady Graciela Sherton was like a ray of sunshine with her yellow gown and bright face. He dismissed the nonsensical thought almost as soon as it popped into his head.

A ray of sunshine? What rubbish.

She was a young woman like any other. Probably not much going on in her upper works except for wondering how to get her hands on his estate for their future children. He reminded himself to remain vigilant in his wariness even though he needed Lady Grace's cooperation in his efforts to seek Rathnelly's patronage.

"My lady." Alex bowed politely before she even approached with her hand outstretched. He didn't like to play the gallant, but he supposed it was necessary if he was going to turn her up sweet. He bowed again and kissed the back of her hand but was surprised when she snatched it back quickly and didn't simper in the least.

"My lord," she replied with a brief curtsy and a furtive glance at her mother.

Alex tried to keep his eyebrows from climbing toward his hairline. He was intrigued to see a young woman more interested in her mother's reactions than his. He tried not to be overbearingly arrogant, but he was a highly eligible bachelor and never seemed to fail to catch the eye of any available female. Even the unavailable females, truth be told, which was one of the many reasons he had so low an opinion of the fairer gender. As one who was quite used to being admired, he was completely unprepared for a young lady who lacked an instant and obvious attraction to him. It was intriguing.

But not as intriguing as why he had called.

"Might I have permission to escort Lady Grace for a stroll, my lady?" Alex properly addressed the question to Lady Sherton, but he

kept his eyes on the object of his interest, surprised by the pallor his request produced.

“The tea hasn’t yet arrived, my lord. Perhaps, it would be best to take your stroll after we’ve shared a cup.” Lady Sherton’s polite words felt a little bit like a reprimand.

Alex bit back a grimace. It would have been too easy if the countess had said, yes. Nothing worthwhile came without sacrifice. Still, time enough to have tea with the grasping women was far more than he would have preferred for his visit. Except, Lady Grace didn’t appear in the least bit grasping. In fact, she seemed discomfited that the afternoon was to be prolonged. She had yet to utter another word since her truncated greeting. He kept his sigh silent as he thought of the effort he was going to have to put in to being conciliatory.

In the end, Lady Sherton *didn’t* make him work overly hard, as she carried on a bright chatter throughout the almost ceremonial session of tea-taking. Alex thought for a moment that he saw amusement in Lady Grace’s eyes as she listened and nodded while her mother prattled on, but he dismissed the thought. He hadn’t yet met a young Society lady who found their mother amusing.

“What do you think, my lord?”

Alex blinked. He hadn’t been attending, and the countess had called him on it. He quickly replayed in his mind as much of the conversation as he could recall.

“I don’t think Parliament will resume any earlier than usual this year, my lady, but I will, of course, do my duty if it does.”

He received her nod of approval for that save and had to stifle the laugh that wanted to come up from his belly. That would certainly not do. He quickly gulped down the rest of his tea and glanced significantly at the countess.

“Have you finished your tea already?” Lady Sherton asked. “Well, young people are always so eager.” Alex fought a blush at her implication when the countess glanced significantly at her daughter. “You may go but not out of sight of the house.”

Alex watched a mutinous expression cross Lady Grace’s face for the briefest moment, and he had a momentary suspicion that the chit didn’t wish for his escort, but he dismissed the thought. Perhaps, she merely hadn’t finished her tea. Just the same, he didn’t have the patience to sit there any longer. She could order another cup when she returned home.

He rose with impatience and waited for Lady Grace to slowly gain her feet.

“I will just fetch a shawl from my chamber and be with you in a moment, my lord,” she murmured and hurried from the room without awaiting his response.

Once again, he swallowed his impatience and offered the countess as sincere a smile as he could muster, not bothering to sit again. He strode toward the windows, feeling confined by the feminine room. He should have just asked for the earl. It was perhaps a bit surprising the man hadn't bothered to put in an appearance even though Alex hadn't asked for him. But of course, it was probably assumed he was there to *court* Lady Grace, rather than just gain information from her. So, the earl would want to stay as far away as possible, no doubt. Alex kept his amusement under a tight leash, along with his impatience.

It was a surprisingly short wait. Within moments, the staccato of hurried footsteps could be heard. He couldn't help smiling when he heard them slow noticeably before Lady Grace appeared in the doorway, perfectly composed and not nearly as out of breath as he would have expected for the hurry she must have been in. Unless she had sent a servant to do her bidding, but for whatever reason, he didn't think she had. He watched her tie her shawl around her shoulders and gesture for him to precede her from the room. Lady Grace dipped a brief curtsy to her mother before following him.

Despite his preoccupation with why he was there, Alex couldn't help being curious about this youngest Sherton daughter. She wasn't turning out to be what he had expected. He should have realized that from their brief encounter at her sister's wedding.

They strolled along in silence, another surprise for Alex. He was used to women chattering his ears nearly off. It would appear this one was preoccupied with her own thoughts.

"It's a lovely day," he remarked, as a way of prompting some conversation and was rewarded with her bright stare and wide grin.

"That it is, my lord." She agreed with him but then went right back to enjoying it. *Silently*. Alex stared as she averted her gaze to the vista before them as they meandered through the Sherton gardens.

"Your gardeners seem skilled," Alex observed.

"They work hard to follow the countess's requests, to be certain."

"Your mother designs the landscape?" Alex was surprised.

"Well, to be fair, much of it was already laid out by my grandmother and possibly even Grandmother's mother-in-law. But my mother takes a keen interest in the gardens and their upkeep. It's where she enjoys spending much of her time with Augustus."

Alex heard a strange note in the girl's voice but couldn't quite point to what he thought it stemmed from. He was inclined to question her but didn't want to get too far from the reason for his visit.

"Have you heard from the newlyweds?"

Lady Grace smiled again. "To be sure. Felicity loves nothing better than a well written letter. She's lucky that she no longer has to

spend all her pin money on it, as the duke has promised her all the franking she could wish for throughout the rest of their lives.”

“That seems an odd gift.”

“Not if you are the sort who spends half the day writing letters.”

“Why would she do that?”

“I might be exaggerating the amount of time she spends but despite my sister’s aversion to making her debut, she is a trifle obsessed with remaining in touch with people. She really ought to enjoy the Season more considering her desire to stay in touch, as it would afford far more opportunity for doing such a thing than simply remaining upon her estate, but there you have it. People are complicated, I suppose.”

Alex wasn’t completely certain what to do with all the information the girl had just handed him. She said it all as though it were a matter of fact and aptly showed she was not quite what he had been expecting.

“Do you share your sister’s aversion to the Season?”

“Not for the same reasons as Felicity, but yes, I do, much to my mother’s horror.”

The laugh with which she concluded her sentence sounded like the tinkle of fairy bells, which was the most ridiculously fanciful thought Alex had ever entertained. He dismissed it immediately. Clearly, he was getting too much sun. He took Lady Grace’s elbow and directed her toward a bench in the shade. He sensed her hesitation for the briefest moment before she allowed him to direct her as he willed.

When next their gazes met, her eyes were wary and watchful. Her pleasant face was creased with a slight frown, and her lips were no longer smiling. But she didn’t say a word.

“Do you think your sister would welcome a visit?”

“Which one and from whom?” Lady Grace countered his question with one of her own, challenging him, even though they had just been discussing one sister in particular.

“The duchess. And from me.”

“You’ll still have to be a trifle more specific, as there are two duchesses in the family now.”

Alex could see that she was enjoying her contrariness, despite her obvious discomfort with his questioning.

“The Duchess of Rathnelly,” he said, as though explaining to a child. This only brought amusement to her and chagrin to him.

“Well, as I mentioned earlier, Her Grace loves staying in touch with people, so if you could tell her that you had recently visited here, I’m certain she would be delighted to receive you. Was there a reason in particular you asked? Do you intend to visit Rathnelly, or are you just making conversation?”

Alex was surprised and intrigued by the watchful intelligence evident in the chit's gaze as she awaited his answer.

"There was something that I hoped to discuss with Rathnelly, to be honest."

Her bright blue eyes narrowed, and her frown intensified.

"Are we being honest now, then, my lord? It seems to me that you are being rather roundabout in your intentions. Did you ask to speak with me in order to ask about my sister in order to speak with the duke? That seems exceedingly complicated. Surely, His Grace would be happy to entertain you if you were to write and request an audience, or even if you were to ride up their drive and present yourself."

Heat crept into Alex's cheeks.

"It does sound convoluted, when you put it that way." He hated to admit, even to himself, that he had been foolish on this matter. When one considered how determined he was not to stir up expectations in a female's mind, his approach did appear rather ridiculous.

He had to explain. "It is well known how close you and your sister are. And though I really need to speak with Rathnelly, I'm afraid he will be . . . unresponsive." He paused again before nodding and offering her what he knew to be an awkward smile. "I know. Even with that explanation, it feels convoluted."

Her steely stare made his collar start to pinch his neck, as a bead of sweat trickled beneath it. If it wasn't directed at him, Alex was reasonably sure he would find it endearing. She was such a small, sunny little character normally that seeing her with a fierce stare and upraised eyebrows was like seeing a kitten trying to guard the house. Still, he was uncomfortably aware that she disapproved of him, and it gave him a very strange sensation. He tried to ignore it.

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

He cringed over the plaintive note in his voice that just couldn't seem to be avoided.

"I'm trying to decide what I want to say," she began while still watching him with a frown. "Your explanation seems lacking somehow, and I'm left to wonder if you are pondering some sort of mischief for my sister and her new family. And then I'm left to wonder if my sister would rather be warned or left to figure it out on her own."

Finally, to Alex's surprise, her frown melted away, replaced with another one of her bright smiles.

"Upon reflection, I think Felicity would enjoy the intrigue of you scheming against them in some way." Suddenly, she was back to glaring. "Provided, of course, your schemes are not actually of a

terribly hurtful nature.”

Alex suddenly laughed.

“What would you do about it if they were?” He couldn’t help but ask the question.

She shrugged and grinned. “I would probably write to Wexford.”

“I can see that having several powerful gentlemen connected to your family tree could be most useful.”

“You have no idea just how useful.”

“Shall we stroll some more, and you can tell me about it?”

Chapter Three

Gracie swallowed her sigh. She didn't want to spend the afternoon with the handsome earl. How tiresome it was that he had called. And how dreadfully, exceedingly tiresome that he was exactly the sort of gentleman her mother would think was highly eligible to become her last son-in-law.

Most young ladies would consider him to be very handsome. Not just the young ladies. Really, anyone with eyes in their head, even other gentlemen, would have to agree that he was pleasing to the eyes. In fact, looking at him made Gracie wish she had a sketch pad in her hands, as it would be quite a challenge to try to capture those cheekbones and jaw. She wasn't certain she had the required skill.

Shoving the ridiculously unhelpful thoughts aside, Grace applied herself to dealing with the matter at hand. Lord Sterling had called on her with some sort of intentions toward Felicity.

"Wexford would not allow you to cause trouble for Felicity," she said in as chatty a manner as she could muster when all she really wanted to do was kick the man in the shins and tell him to leave her family alone.

At least, it didn't seem as though he were calling on her for the traditional reasons that a gentleman calls upon a woman, which was a selfish relief. For the most part, in any case. Grace refused to acknowledge the tiny part of her that was disappointed. That was just female silliness, which she had every intention of ignoring.

"I can assure you, I have no intention of causing any sort of trouble for your sister. Or your brother-in-law, for that matter. It would be an exaggeration to claim that Wexford is a friend, but I would definitely say that I am on friendly terms with the man and have no intention of altering that state of affairs." He paused for a moment as they resumed their stroll. "Although, I must point out that it is a trifle strange that you mention that Wexford would take exception to my causing trouble for the duchess but not her husband. Why did you not threaten me with Rathnelly's wrath?"

Grace laughed. "I felt that Wexford poses a more serious threat."

She watched from the corner of her eye as he contemplated her answer before a smile spread across his face. Gracie averted her eyes. She didn't need that image to be burned into her eyes.

"I can see why you would think that," he finally said.

"Do you not agree? Would you consider Rathnelly more dangerous?"

To Grace's surprise, the earl shrugged.

"I don't really think of either of them as dangerous."

"You don't?" Gracie asked, feeling awed. "You are certainly in the minority, in that case."

"Do *you* consider them dangerous?"

"Absolutely," Gracie replied promptly. At his look of surprise, she quickly added, "Not to my person or to me personally, but I know how they are when something they consider theirs is threatened. And my sisters and I are considered theirs."

"I see."

Grace wasn't sure what his words were supposed to mean. What did he think he saw?

"So, are you going to tell me what you wish to discuss with Rathnelly?"

"It's a private matter," he excused.

"You are the one who made it not so private by coming here, my lord."

"I can see that it was not my best laid plan."

Grace laughed and nodded.

"I feel as though there must have been more to your visit."

Suddenly, the man's friendliness and seeming openness disappeared in a blink, and Gracie was left to wonder if she had imagined it in the first place.

"What do *you* suppose could have been my reasons?" he asked in a cool voice, as though he were trying to freeze her out.

"I haven't the faintest idea, my lord, which is why I asked. But surely, you'll admit that your visit has been a trifle strange."

He unbent slightly and offered her a faint smile. "Perhaps."

They walked along again in silence, and Grace marvelled that she was no longer uncomfortable with the man, despite all the reasons why she ought to be. It was the first time she had been called upon by a gentleman who was not a part of her family. And he clearly had ulterior motives. But still, she was comfortable with him.

So comfortable, she could only hope he would leave soon. She didn't want to feel comfortable with a handsome, eligible gentleman. Her mother would have them wed before either of them could gainsay her. That was not at all in harmony with Grace's plans for herself.

"Well, since you've accomplished your stated purpose for your call, you probably have need to be on your way," she stated simply. "Lakewood is nearly an hour or so away. I wouldn't imagine you would like to be on the road at dusk."

The earl laughed. "Are you that eager to be rid of me, my lady?"

Heat filled Grace's cheeks, but she ignored the sensation, refusing to be cowed by the arrogant man.

"I wouldn't word it quite like that, but I don't see any need for you to linger."

Lord Sterling chuckled again. "You are a most unusual young woman, Lady Grace."

"So, I have been told, my lord." Gracie grinned in order to discomfit him further. If he was going to turn up and complicate her life, she had no compunction about being less than conciliatory.

Grace could just imagine the confrontation she would face with the countess once the earl had left. She would rather get it over with sooner than later. She had no intention of allowing anyone, not even herself, to get the wrong idea about Lord Sterling's visit that day. Even though he had asked for her, he clearly hadn't meant anything particularly intriguing by it.

"Why didn't you ask Lady Sherton about Felicity's availability for a visit, my lord? Surely, asking to see me was asking for far more trouble than it's worth."

Grace watched in amusement as the man gazed at her, as though she were a strange specimen he had never before encountered. He even opened and closed his mouth a number of times, as though he couldn't quite give voice to his thoughts.

"That is a most excellent question, my lady, but I sadly do not have a logical answer to it, other than your reputed closeness with the duchess."

"Do you have an illogical answer to it?" she asked, once again enjoying his obvious difficulty in answering her.

Finally, he just smiled and steered her back toward the house.

Grace tried not to allow her own smile to appear too satisfied. She still had the countess to face. She kept her manner as neutrally pleasant as possible as she bade the earl farewell. It was likely she would have to encounter him again if she couldn't convince her parents to allow her to forego her debut altogether. It wouldn't do to make him an enemy. With a final curtsy, she dismissed the man.

Turning to the butler with a smile she knew to be more brave than genuine, Grace asked for her mother's whereabouts.

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"Why did you not have his lordship stay for supper?"

Her mother's shrill tone was only one of the things making Gracie blush.

"Mother, surely it would not have been appropriate for me to issue such an invitation."

"Well, Graciela, surely you are not so lacking in intelligence that you couldn't have made the arrangements without putting yourself beyond the pale. Look at what your sisters have accomplished. I will not accept that my youngest is any less capable than they are."

“Truly, Mother? Are you going to hold my sisters as examples for me to emulate? Do you also wish for me to involve myself with treasonous schemes? Or to compromise myself into an eligible match?”

“Well, those things worked quite nicely for the other girls. And I am quite convinced that you are smart enough to manage it with even less risk than they courted.”

“I am afraid you are going to be sorely disappointed, my lady. I have absolutely no intention of following in any of their footsteps, least of all Felicity’s. And I am appalled that you would even suggest it. Don’t you remember how furious you were when you found out what she had done?”

“Well, it all came out in the laundry, didn’t it?” Lady Sherton’s entire demeanour was one of self-satisfaction as she raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms, as though the matter were settled thoroughly.

Grace was amused by her mother’s literary reference, but she didn’t allow herself to be side-tracked from the point at hand. “It could just as easily have gone in a very different, much more disastrous direction.” Gracie couldn’t believe she was having this conversation. Up until a few years ago, she was certain her mother would have preferred death over even the suggestion of impropriety.

“But it didn’t.”

Gracie sighed and dropped onto the sofa. Her mother was on the edge of becoming irrational about the matter, and she had no interest in arguing further.

“Mother, my lady,” she began as firmly as she could manage. All she really wanted to do was escape from the uncomfortable situation. “I will not be attempting to coerce a gentleman into sharing his time with me. In fact, I really have no strong desire to wed, as you well know. And I truly have no desire to wed Lord Sterling. Please, put that idea from your mind. He did not come here to court me. I have never heard of him courting anyone, despite how popular he is among Society’s hostesses, so it is unlikely he is going to start with me. He wanted my opinion on something. I gave it to him. He left. That is the end of the story. I must insist that you accept that.”

Grace paused in order to take a deep breath. After slowly letting it out, she continued in a more conciliatory tone.

“You successfully married off four of your daughters. You now have Augustus to care for. You needn’t trouble yourself with me. I can assure you I am perfectly content remaining here at Glendale.”

Lady Sherton’s eyes narrowed.

“I know, you might think I have become addled with my delight over the baby, but do not think for a moment that I have forgotten my

responsibility toward you. And do you really think you ought to have the sole aspiration of becoming a dependent upon your baby brother?"

Gracie blinked in shock at her mother's words. "I would think our relationship could be mutually beneficial."

"Perhaps, until he is of age to marry. But then it will be awkward and uncomfortable for both of you."

Grace stared at the countess for a moment before she forced a light laugh.

"I will take your words as a matter of something I must give further thought. But you must rid yourself of the notion that I am going to set my cap for Lord Sterling. I doubt he will be returning, and I shan't be seeking him out."

Lady Sherton gave a noncommittal hum at her response, but Gracie accepted it. At least her mother was no longer trying to convince her that she ought to have kept the man there to take a meal with them.

Grace climbed the stairs toward her room, contemplating the strange afternoon. She would have to consider her mother's viewpoint about her intention to remain at home at some point, but she felt a little too much upheaval in her heart to do so rationally at the moment.

There was absolutely no way anyone would be able to convince her of the propriety of setting her cap at anyone, let alone the arrogant and independent Earl Sterling. But it had been oddly pleasant to stroll with him in the gardens. Odd, because they had seemed to be at cross purposes much of the time, but despite that, he had been a pleasant companion. Perhaps it was because he wasn't attempting a flirtation. Not that she had so very much experience in the matter, but when gentlemen tried to set up a flirtation with her, rather than finding it flattering, Grace became uncomfortable and flustered. In contrast, she had felt as though she could be straightforward with Lord Sterling. It was refreshing. And it certainly didn't hurt that he was so very pleasant to look at. Not that she would ever admit as much to Mother, or she'd be walking toward the minister in a heartbeat.

With a sigh, Grace turned her attention back to getting ready for the evening meal with her parents. She was sure her mother would try to bring the earl's visit up for discussion, despite Grace's insistence that she had no interest in him. Grace would have her maid pull out her favourite green muslin. Knowing she was comfortably but beautifully attired would help her feel armoured for the genteel battle that was sure to be staged over the meat course. Why wouldn't they let her remain in her lazy comfortable routine?

Chapter Four

Alex rode away from Glendale feeling out of sorts. His visit had not gone in the least as he had expected. It had clearly been a foolish errand in the first place. As Lady Grace had said, he really could just ride up to Rathnelly's estate and ask for the man.

He brightened a little as he remembered something else the impudent young woman had said. Thanks to his visit to Glendale, he now had knowledge to entice the duchess to entertain him. He would head to Rathnelly the next day. If he left early enough, he could be there by mid-afternoon. Of course, it might appear strange if he tried to claim he had just been in the neighbourhood. Alex sighed. He would have to go visit one of his other properties, closer to Rathnelly, to be able to claim he had been nearby.

If only he weren't so obsessed with horses. And with gainsaying his dead father. Alex shook his head as he thought again about his conversation with Lady Graciela. Convoluting was right.

Alex rode out early the next morning. Owning he could not try to claim he had been casually in the area if he arrived travel worn and filthy, he headed toward Oakwood first. It was probably about time for him to visit the property anyway.

It was a perfect day for riding. Alex felt as though his cares and concerns were being brushed away from his mind as the wind rifled through his hair. As he urged his horse into a faster pace, the wind blowing past his ears combined with the rhythmic sound of the hoof beats on the hard soil beneath them blocked out everything else, and he felt as one with the beast beneath him. It was the most relaxed he had felt in weeks, even though his muscles were all engaged and a sheen of sweat was beginning to form on his forehead.

Even though he was relaxing and felt as though the wind in his hair was clearing out his thoughts, he couldn't seem to get Lady Grace from his mind. It was most irksome. He had thought he couldn't focus on more than one thing, and perhaps that was true because even when he was contemplating his destination or his plans, the chit kept intruding. He found himself wondering if she would like the scenery or what she would have to say about whatever thoughts were in his head.

How was he supposed to know what she would say? And why did he care what she thought? She tended to be rather sparing with sharing her thoughts anyway, so it was unlikely he could guess what she might think. He tightened his grip on the reins and urged his

horse to increase its pace.

Alex was mud splattered and worn out when he and his horse finally rode into the Oakwood stable yard. He had been forced to allow the animal to slow its pace at various points along the way, but they had still made the journey faster than he ever had before. It was as though he had been trying to outrun his disquieting thoughts without a great deal of success.

It was a beautiful estate. He had always thought so. But it left him with tumultuous feelings. It had been his father's favourite estate. Alex was only glad it wasn't part of his title. No one ever referred to him as the Earl or Viscount of Oakwood. In fact, the property was almost never referred to by anyone at all. It was just a piece of property he happened to inherit from the man who sired him. Not that there was anything truly wrong with his father. Alex had loved the man, of course, but he hadn't really liked him, and he was reasonably certain the feelings had been mutual.

That was part of the reason he really wanted to collaborate with the duke. Alex felt the need to prove himself to his father, even though his father was gone.

Of course, his father would have hated the idea. It was surely beneath the Earl of Lakewood to participate in something so bourgeois as horse trading. That might be part of the appeal, Alex was man enough to admit. He grinned to himself in a weary sort of way at the thought of the expression. It was rather childish to be trying to thumb his nose at his long dead father. And yet, he considered himself to be man enough for something, while still acting so childish. That was a contradiction if ever he'd heard one. He chuckled as the butler helped him out of his overcoat.

"Are you well, my lord?" the older servant asked. Alex appreciated the respectful tone, considering he probably sounded like a candidate for Bedlam.

"Perfectly fine, thank you, Mr. Grimsby. I was just thinking about something."

"Something amusing, I take it, my lord?"

"Quite," he replied with a smile. "Rigsby will be arriving with my luggage this afternoon at some point," Alex informed the butler as he glanced down at his mud-splattered clothing. "I shall make do until then." He grimaced at the thought of remaining in soiled attire. Even though she had been gone more than five years, Alex could still hear his mother scolding him over his unkempt state.

"It is good to have you here, my lord."

Alex cringed with guilt at the butler's hesitant tone. He really ought to pay the estate more attention on a regular basis. "Thank you, Mr. Grimsby, it's good to be here." He turned on his heel and headed

for the stairs. If he was going to make himself comfortable, he would start with his clothing. Surely, he had left something in his rooms when last he was in residence. It was the first time he had ridden there and arrived without luggage or personal servant, so he wasn't completely sure what state his rooms might be in.

You are an adult man and the head of this household, he reminded himself, *you can surely manage to sit about in dusty pants if needs must*. Despite that bolstering thought, he was definitely relieved to find that there were, in fact, several pairs of clothing in his room. They might not be worthy of a court visit, but they were sufficient for whatever he might encounter the remainder of the day.

He felt inclined to muck out stalls, as a matter of fact, so anything unglamorous in his wardrobe would do well. Of course, his servants would be made uncomfortable if he were to turn up and attempt such a menial task. That thought made him smile and inexplicably think of Lady Graciela, which brought another grimace to his face. *Why wouldn't the girl stay out of his head?*

After quickly exchanging his soiled clothes for something more presentable, Alex determined that he ought to review the estate accounts. It was the most tedious job, so he wished to get it out of the way first off, then perhaps he might enjoy his time at Oakwood. Too, he would then have something concrete to discuss with Rathnelly when he went there the next day.

With a decisive nod, he took himself off to the library.

His scrutiny of the books made him frown. Something wasn't adding up — literally. Perhaps, his steward wasn't the best at maths. But from what he could see, this wasn't just mathematical mistakes. In fact, it would seem the man was, in all reality, probably quite skilled at math and was trying to hide the fact that he was robbing the estate quite intensely. It wasn't just a matter of losing out on the income he should have been receiving. If the estate wasn't profitable, it affected everyone on it, including his tenants.

A strange, sick feeling swelled in Alex's midsection. His steward was clearly robbing him, robbing his tenants. He couldn't fathom someone doing that. He stood and paced the room, organizing his thoughts. He would need to confront the man, but how? And when? "Now," he said out loud. He couldn't stand the thought of having the man in his employ a moment longer.

Alex had his steward called for as he stared off into the middle distance. From the gossip he had tried not to listen to, Lady Graciela had started developing a reputation for involving herself in the running of her father's affairs. He had dismissed the idea at the time, but now he wondered what she would think of his having allowed one of his estates to be exploited.

He rather thought she would smile gently, without much said, before dismissing him from her mind as she went about righting the wrongs he had allowed to take place. That thought had a grin on his face when his recalcitrant steward was shown into the room.

“Raymond,” Alex said by way of brief greeting.

“My lord.” The man bobbed a bow but looked ready to bolt.

“You may take a seat,” Alex said through thin lips, holding his irritation in check.

The steward slowly did as he had been told, clearly uncomfortable with being there, as he kept casting furtive glances at the ledgers open on the desk in front of the earl.

“It’s good to see you here, my lord. I’ve been doing my best, but it’s always better to have the master present.”

“This is your best?” Alex repeated, staring at the man, as he gulped and fidgeted.

“Yes, my lord.” The man wouldn’t meet Alex’s gaze, casting furtive glances toward the door, but his tone remained a trifle belligerent.

Alex frowned down at the ledger before him. He didn’t want to be unfair to the man. Perhaps, he truly was merely incompetent, not intentionally damaging his estate or robbing from him. And really, as earl, it was Alex’s duty to be on top of things, even the things he had hired others to oversee. With a sigh, he had to acknowledge that whatever the case might be, he ought to have come round far sooner to check on things.

“How did you get hired to be steward if you cannot process basic addition?” He tried not to sneer over the question. Perhaps, the poor man really couldn’t do the maths.

The steward began to sputter.

“My addition skills have never been called into question afore, my lord. Yer father seemed satisfied.”

“That might be true, although from what I knew of him, I can’t imagine him allowing such irregularities. Whatever the case, I am not satisfied with what I have found in these ledgers, and I will have to end your employment here at Oakwood.”

“You can’t do that, Sterling! What am I to do?”

“I can, in fact, do that. If you were having troubles here, your duty was to inform me. Regardless of the reasons for the state of these ledgers, whether it is incompetence, circumstances, or wickedness, your duty was to tell me of it, especially if you couldn’t fix it. You failed quite spectacularly in that duty. I have no choice but to replace you.”

“Wickedness?”

Alex felt a momentary urge to laugh as the man sputtered over

the word, as though he couldn't begin to imagine why it had even been suggested. But that didn't inspire the earl with confidence or make him reconsider.

"I will have the footmen escort you to your room and oversee your departure."

"You're gonna regret this, Sterling."

Alex sighed again as the man bellowed and swore, while several of his burlier servants helped him from the room. Raymond wasn't wrong. Alex regretted the entire incident. But ignorance of the situation wasn't going to make it any less of an issue. It was his own fault for having left the estate on its own for so long. He thought of his other properties and stifled any further regrets. The situation was one of his own making. He would just have to see to fixing it.

And now, he would need to hire a new steward since, even if he managed to sort out all the problems he had found, he wouldn't be able to remain on the estate indefinitely. But how was he to find someone sufficiently knowledgeable and reputable?

Suddenly, he brightened as he realized this would give him another appropriate excuse to visit Rathnelly. Surely, the duke would be able to recommend someone to him.

The next morning, he was ready to go long before it was acceptable to make morning calls. He tried to pass the time in his library as he continued reviewing the estate accounts, taking note of all discrepancies and meeting with the housekeeper and butler. It was evident to Alex that neither of his servants were terribly surprised by the news that the steward had been less than reliable.

"My apologies, my lord," Mr. Grimbsy had said. "I ought to have written to inform you of my suspicions, but I had worried it wasn't my place to do so."

The man's words made Alex consider releasing him from his position as well, but he assured himself that was surely an overreaction. He merely nodded instead. Nearly all of the servants had been in his employ when he inherited. He really ought not hold that against them.

"In the future, please do contact me about any concerns you might have. I will, though, make an effort to spend more time here and see for myself how things are faring. We shall contrive to cooperate in what is best for Oakwood together."

Both Grimbsy and the housekeeper nodded and bobbed, expressing their agreement without words. Alex would have to be satisfied with that, as they made no move to offer him further reassurance. Finally, a glance at the clock told him he could set out for Rathnelly without being unforgivably early. With relief, he called for a carriage to be readied. He would prefer to ride but with the state he

had been in when he'd arrived yesterday, he knew he couldn't ride all the way and still appear presentable for elevated company.

Chapter Five

Dearest Graciela:

Surely, it is time for you to come for a visit. It has been far too long since you were here last. I am nearly pining for you.

Gracie smirked over the opening words of her sister's latest letter. Despite how busy she was as a duchess and mother, Felicity hadn't let up in her love of corresponding with as many people as she could. Grace was reasonably certain her sister had reduced the frequency of some of her letters, but she still found the time to write almost daily to her youngest sister.

Grace appreciated the effort all her sisters made to keep in touch with her, but most especially Felicity, her sister closest in age as well as fondness. Her sister's addiction to letter writing had been the only reason she had agreed to help Felicity with her madcap scheme to escape what she had seen as her mundane future.

Gracie wondered if Felicity was missing home despite her evident delight with her new life. Having grown up in a family of five girls, it was likely she was missing female companionship, though she did have her stepdaughter for company. Grace looked around the familiar room. She didn't really have any strong desire to leave the comforts of home, but a brief visit to help her sister adjust to her new circumstances wouldn't be so bad.

She liked to savour her sisters' letters, so she had taken her eyes off the page as she contemplated Felicity's opening sentences. Now, she looked back and nearly choked as she read the next paragraph.

Lord Sterling came by to tell us about his visit with you. I think you ought to consider him as a potential suitor. I know it's quite hypocritical of me to change my mind so completely about my stand on marrying a noble, but I can tell you, you will quite like it.

Grace rolled her eyes hard. Felicity had always been the managing sort. Not quite as bad as Hilaria perhaps, but she definitely always thought she knew what was best for her youngest sister. Felicity was deeply devoted to her stepchildren, so Grace had thought that would be enough to keep Felicity from trying to direct her life, but she should have known better. It would seem Felicity was going to try her hand at matchmaking.

Maybe she shouldn't have suggested to the earl that he mention he had called upon them as a way of introduction to the duchess. The fact that he had been at Felicity's wedding should have been sufficient, and so she should have told him. With a sigh and a shake of

her head, she turned her attention back to the letter. It was a letter, she reminded herself. She could easily just ignore the parts she didn't want to deal with. Or so she thought.

After her sister's citation of all that she and the Barrington children had been up to of late, she concluded with words that set a shiver of foreboding up her spine.

I know you are the homiest of all us girls and would rather remain ensconced at Glendale for the rest of your life. But I cannot agree that it is best for you. I hope you won't mind terribly, but I've written to Mother to formally invite you to visit. You really must come.

Grace stared at the paper in her hands as though it had suddenly burnt her fingers. *Felicity has certainly taken to the role of duchess*, she thought with asperity.

Of course, Mother would think it a most excellent idea. It would seem the countess was finally recovering from her single-minded fascination with the young heir. Augustus was now toddling around the estate and, to Grace's mind, ought to be even more all-consuming, since he could get into much more trouble now that he could move around under his own efforts. But their mother had finally started to notice other things in her life and was returning to her managing and controlling ways once more. Other things . . . such as her youngest daughter's unwed state. And her dismay that Graciela didn't wish to ever leave Glendale.

Gracie could see that Lady Sherton would think her visiting Rathnelly would be a good first step toward getting her to Town.

She took a deep breath, releasing it slowly and quietly, trying not to sigh. Gracie didn't like to sigh, as it revealed too much of one's inner turmoil and she did it far too often without noticing. But if there ever *was* a time to sigh, it was now.

Why wouldn't everyone just let her remain comfortably as she was? She was far from aged. Surely, there was time for her to make her debut later. She couldn't define when exactly an acceptable later might be, but surely it didn't have to be soon.

Still, she couldn't think of an acceptable reason to avoid visiting Felicity. She had been in favour of a visitation when she thought it was to assist her sister. But if the duchess thought she was going to match her sister up with a nobleman, Grace couldn't muster a single iota of interest in making the trip.

Being a nobleman's daughter, it wasn't as though she had anything against nobles in general. But this particular gentleman made her uneasy. She couldn't completely explain why. Part of it, she was fairly sure, stemmed from the fact that he was the most attractive man she had ever met. And well he knew it. Gracie didn't think she would be comfortable with a husband who was better looking than

she was. That only worked for birds. She grinned at the thought, abandoning the frown that had formed as she'd contemplated her sister's plans. Then too, there was the fact that she couldn't keep the dratted man from her thoughts. If ever there was a man who could rearrange her carefully laid plans, it was him. That simply would not do. Felicity could not be allowed to continue along this path.

Grace shrugged. If Felicity had written to their mother, there was little Grace would be able to do to avoid the visitation. And surely, she wasn't so daft that she wouldn't be able to sidestep her sister's machinations. She had years of experience in the art.

"Are you that eager to see the back of me, then?" she asked her mother while taking tea in the countess's favourite withdrawing room. Despite Grace's displeasure with the turn of events, Lady Sherton did not consider the afternoon ritual to be disposable.

"Not in the least, you silly girl. But surely, you must see that it is time for you to get comfortable with leaving here. You cannot sit in the baby's pocket for the rest of your life."

Gracie stilled as heat suffused her body. She had absolutely no intention of taking advantage of her brother in any way. If anything, she had thought she would be of assistance to him by remaining at Glendale, since their parents surely weren't going to live forever. But of course, she couldn't point that out to her mother.

With a nod, Gracie gained her feet.

"You are quite right, of course, my lady. How soon do you suppose I should be on my way?"

"If you agree, the servants could have your things ready by morning."

Grace's cheeks burned anew. It would seem the matter was of the utmost urgency. Mortification wouldn't kill her, but she wished it could. She couldn't even be angry with her mother and sister. She was well aware that they thought they knew what was best for her and were, at least for the most part, motivated by love and concern for her. For their mother, there was likely a dash of pride thrown in for good measure. Mother would never be able to hold her head up amongst her friends if she had a spinster on her hands. She wouldn't *really* be considered on the shelf for at least a couple more years, but that thought was little consolation, as Grace was certain her mother would not be so accommodating.

Grace would be on the way to Rathnelly in the morning, whether she truly wished to be or not. Her only hope was to come up with a plan for how to avoid her sister's matchmaking forays.

Such a task would be so much easier if Grace didn't find her mind constantly fixating on the gentleman in question.

Grace returned to her room after the audience with her mother. If

she was to be traveling to Rathnelly for an extended visit, she ought to oversee the packing and ensure her favourite things were included. But at the back of her mind, she began enumerating her list of all the reasons why she did not want her sister to try to match her with Lord Sterling.

1. She didn't want to wed – Grace was afraid that even though this was her number one reason, it was likely to be ignored by everyone important to her.

2. The man was insufferably arrogant – again, Grace doubted either her sister or her mother would consider this to be a true impediment. It seemed to be considered acceptable if a gentleman were sufficiently wellborn and his pockets were deep enough.

3. He didn't seem to have any particular interest in her – knowing Felicity, she would consider this to be a challenge rather than a detriment. But Gracie wasn't Felicity, and it was a rather significant point in her estimation. She didn't have the skill nor the temperament to try to ensnare a gentleman's interest.

4. Did she really need any more reason? Should her sister not take her word for the fact that she didn't want to be match-made?

With a huff of frustration, Grace turned her mind from her list. It was getting her nowhere. She would discuss it with Felicity, and she would do her very best to be firm when she did so.

True to her mother's words, Gracie found herself rolling down the road in a luggage-laden carriage with her maid beside her, feeling bemused at how quickly it had all come together. She had been particularly surprised at how sorry she was to say goodbye to her baby brother. Little Augustus, the family's prized heir and viscount, had finally reached the more interesting stage of being able to communicate. With his personality finally displaying itself, Grace had discovered she quite cared for the little boy, despite the fact that he had usurped their parents' full attention for the past few years. Her current circumstances led Grace to consider that perhaps it would have been better if he had managed to hold onto that undivided attention a little longer. Then she wouldn't be rolling toward her sister's new matchmaking obsession.

A tear rolled down Grace's cheek, and she dashed it away with impatience. Turning melancholy was the very last thing needed in this situation. With a sniff, she accepted the handkerchief her maid handed her without a word. Gracie appreciated the servant's forbearance as she herself wouldn't have been able to contain a mocking remark over

the ridiculousness of it all.

How could she be sad to be on her way to visit her favourite person? She ought to be excited beyond all bounds. Grace and Felicity had been the closest friends possible for two people with such complete opposite temperaments. Perhaps, it was that very opposite nature that had made them so close. Grace, despite her tendency to overthink everything, had never really thought about why she loved her sister so very much, she had just accepted it as a foundational fact of her life. But now, she faced the visitation with a sensation of trepidation. Despite her sister's frequent letters, Grace didn't actually know all that much about Felicity's life at Rathnelly. Certainly not first-hand information like she'd had about her sister's life up until now.

Am I perhaps jealous of the Barringtons? She scoffed at the notion. She was delighted for Felicity. Her sister seemed much happier than Grace had ever known her to be. Content for the first time since Felicity had discovered that girls were treated differently than boys. For that, Grace was grateful to the duke and his children. No, Grace was certain that rather than jealousy, it was just a sense of being left out for the first time. But really, she reminded herself, it was far from the first time. She had never been able or even interested in keeping up with Felicity's fits and starts. Since they were small, she had known about Felicity's adventures but had only occasionally fully shared in them.

Usually, as it had been when Felicity fooled the entire family and accepted work as Lady Adelina's paid companion, Grace's role was to keep her sister's secrets. It had all worked out in the end when Felicity's brief role as companion became a more permanent one as Adelina's stepmother, through her marriage to the Duke of Rathnelly. While Felicity's convoluted stratagems often worked out in the end, Grace shuddered at the thought of enduring something so risky. She was well aware of her identity as the boring Sherton Sister and didn't resent it overmuch. She had less than no interest in having such an adventure. She would far rather stay safe and sound at Glendale for the rest of her days.

"Surely, you don't wish to sit in your baby brother's pocket for the rest of your days." Only a mother could employ such a cool tone with her daughter. Remembering the haughty expression that had accompanied her mother's question settled a chill in Grace's heart. She nibbled on her lip as she turned her watery gaze to the side so she could observe the passing landscape. In silent reply to her mother's question, Grace thought an emphatic "no." She wished to help her brother, of course; that had been her intentions when she thought of never leaving home. She had never thought to take advantage. The very thought suffused

her with shame. Grace twisted her lips. That was likely her mother's intention.

Perhaps, everyone was right. Not about Lord Sterling, of course. Grace would still have to set her sister straight about trying to arrange a match with the over-handsome earl. But Grace would try to use her time at Rathnelly to grow more comfortable with the thought of going into Society. She could only imagine how Felicity would react at the news. It would likely take all of Gracie's strength to keep a tight rein on her sister's enthusiasm. Grace had no interest in being her sister's latest project. Even if she did wed, as everyone seemed to believe, Grace was very sure her desire for a simple, even boring, life should not involve marriage to someone as complicated and appealing as Lord Sterling. What was more, Grace was stubborn enough to never go along with Felicity's intentions just for spite. Grace loved her sister, but Felicity's ideas were always far too convoluted for Grace's peace of mind.

She couldn't completely abandon her hope that her parents would allow her to peacefully drift into spinsterhood, but perhaps that would be too unconventional for her after all. It would be something to consider while at Rathnelly, at any rate. She would think on it whenever she could remove the handsome earl from her thoughts. She could only hope contemplating a simple, sweet, average nobleman would keep thoughts of Lord Sterling firmly from her mind.

Chapter Six

He had been invited for dinner at Rathnelly. Surely, this could only mean the duke was ready to consider allowing him to invest in his breeding enterprise. His Grace hadn't seemed too receptive to his interest when last he had called, turning the subject immediately. But Alex had tried to be clear about his desire, so surely the invitation could only mean His Grace had changed his mind.

Alex shook his head at himself in the mirror. Truly, he was acting like a dog on a scent. He ought to have the intelligence to be able to shift his attention elsewhere. If Rathnelly didn't wish to allow outside investors, that was, of course, his right. Alex should be able to find some other venture to invest in. Really, he ought to have the mental agility to be able to figure out an enterprise of his own rather than trying to catch a ride on someone else's efforts.

With a shake of his head, Alex attempted to shift the negative direction of his thoughts. He didn't want to talk to himself the way his father had always spoken. It was one of the reasons he was quite determined not to take a wife. Alex doubted he would know how treat a child the way he was certain a child ought to be treated. If he couldn't rid himself of the scars of his childhood, even now, there was no way he was going to take a chance on continuing the dreadful dynasty.

But he still needed to keep himself occupied and care for his inheritance, even if he didn't intend to pass it on to anyone closely related to him. It wasn't his lands' fault that his father had been a dreadful occupant and father.

Without another word to his valet, Alex headed toward the stairs, accepting his hat and cloak from Rigsby as he passed by.

He was sufficiently intelligent, wasn't he? He would figure things out as he went, including that very evening. However the dinner and evening progressed, he was Lord Sterling. As such, he had little choice but to prevail.

He kept repeating such encouraging words all the way to the duke's estate and up the long, unending lane to the house, refusing to be intimidated by the landscape or the austere façade of the ducal residence.

Alex smiled as a groom stepped forward to take his horse and carriage. He trusted the beast would be in good hands on such a horse-mad property.

Another servant stepped forward to receive his hat and cloak just

as he stepped into the foyer.

“Good evening, my lord. Welcome to Rathnelly.” The butler greeted him with a bow before gesturing for Alex to follow him deeper into the large house.

“Lord Sterling has arrived, Your Grace,” the butler announced with another bow, leaving Alex to face the occupants of the room.

“Good evening,” Rathnelly called in the most jovial tone Alex had ever heard from the normally very serious duke. He wondered if it was the presence of the Barrington children that were putting the man in a more relaxed frame of mind.

Alex stepped forward to bow over the duchess’s hand and was surprised to see her sister was present. He almost blurted out his greeting to her before recalling himself to required proprieties.

“It’s a pleasure to see you once more, Your Grace. And how nice to see that your sister has joined your household.” Alex thought he had struck exactly the right note but then wasn’t sure, as he saw the two women exchange expressions that he couldn’t interpret.

“We are glad you could join us, my lord,” the duchess stated in her matter-of-fact way that never ceased to surprise Alex. He had never met a woman who seemed so determined to be straightforward. He wondered if it was just an impression he got from her, or if she really were as open as she tried to portray. It was far different than the impression he had of her sister, who struck Alex as one who wished to keep her own counsel in all things. Perhaps, it was the duchess’s exposure to the children that had influenced her to be so open.

“Won’t you have a seat?” the duchess invited, interrupting his conflicted thoughts. “The butler won’t be calling us for dinner for a little while yet. Perhaps, we could offer you some sort of refreshment.”

“Some port or claret would be pleasant, thank you.” Alex hoped his nerves didn’t betray him as he almost stammered over his response. To his surprise, the children saved him from awkwardness when they stepped forward to be introduced.

“I do hope you don’t mind that we shan’t be standing on ceremony, my lord. The youngsters join us for our evening meal nearly every night.”

Alex was surprised but thought it might be more interesting that way. He hadn’t dined with children since he was one himself. But at least these children weren’t the sort that would be eating with their fingers or throwing their food around. He offered a smile and a nod in place of a response. Really, how else was he supposed to answer? Surely, the duchess couldn’t be expecting he might object, even if he thought her words to be objectionable.

Rathnelly's heir, Lord Wickham, stepped forward and engaged Alex in a rousing debate about the various merits of fencing and archery. Much to his surprise, Alex had never given thought to many of the boy's points. The younger brother was equally engaged on the topic, as evidenced by the way his face bobbed back and forth between Wickham and Alex.

"Never mind about such silly topics, Gardner," Lady Adelina, the duke's only daughter, finally interrupted. "I'd like a chance to speak with our guest, and you are rudely monopolizing him."

Stifling the laughter that threatened to follow the girl's complaint, Alex bowed to her and offered his apologies. "I do apologize, my lady, for my rudeness. I allowed myself to become too engrossed."

"You needn't apologize, my lord. You are our guest. It's my brother who ought to have known better."

The glowers the children shot toward each other made more amusement bubble up within him, but he managed to keep his expression contained, or so he hoped. Alex would hate to think he had been one to shatter a child's self esteem.

His flicked his gaze around the room and was surprised to encounter a variety of reactions from the other adults in the room. Both the duke and duchess were watching the children with almost twin expressions of indulgence upon their faces. The duchess, in particular, appeared to be quite approving of the byplay amongst her brood. On the other end of the spectrum was Lady Grace, who appeared fascinated but also somewhat horrified by the scene she was watching, as though she thought she shouldn't be witness to such displays. He suspected she had been raised in a household where the children were kept to the nursery more than those in her sister's household seemed to be.

Alex pulled his attention back to his host's daughter. "Was there something in particular you wished to discuss with me, my lady?"

The girl cast a furtive glance at her stepmother before declaring, "I've heard you are the best dancer in the *ton*. Is that true?"

Heat climbed Alex's cheeks as he sensed the discomfort of the other adults, but he kept his gaze affixed to the child.

"I think that might just be a rumour, my lady," he managed to say without choking on the words. "Have you been to any balls lately?"

"No," she answered with an indignant expression. "I've just turned ten."

"Oh dear. Is that too young for balls?"

"Decidedly," came the deep-toned reply of the duke. "Don't be encouraging her, Sterling. I'm going to have enough trouble with her as it is."

Finally, Alex allowed his mirth to express itself. He offered the

child another brief bow. "I promise, if I'm invited, I'll dance with you at your first ball, and you can tell me for yourself what you think of my ability."

She stared at him for a moment, her brows drawn. "You could be my dancing instructor, if you'd like."

"I'm reasonably sure his lordship is far too occupied for such an activity, Lady Adelina," Lady Grace answered before he formulated a response. She spoke as though she couldn't hold her silence any longer. The child folded her arms in a defiant manner, making Alex afraid that a dreadful scene was about to unfold but to his surprise, Grace approached the girl and quietly solved the problem.

With an arm around Lady Adelina, Grace spoke in a whisper loud enough for all the room to hear.

"Surely, you'd rather have lessons before you take a chance on the earl, my dear. I've danced with him, and I can vouch for the fact that he is quite skilled. Because of that, I can assure you, if I were you, I'd rather make sure I knew what I was doing for fear of embarrassing myself. Imagine if you trod on his pretty shoes?"

Everyone in the room glanced at Alex's feet, making him hope the heat in his cheeks wasn't making itself noticed, but he still admired how Lady Graciela handled the situation. Despite the fact that she was the youngest of Lord Sherton's daughters, she seemed skilled in negotiating childish impulses.

"Perhaps, you can interest Lord Sterling in discussing the route from his estate to yours," she suggested, again surprising him.

"Do you have a map, my lord?" Lady Adelina asked eagerly.

"Of my estate, do you mean?"

The girl shrugged. "And the countryside around it, I was thinking."

"I do at home, but I didn't bring it with me, I'm afraid."

"That's too bad. Does that mean you don't know how to read maps?" she asked, her tone challenging.

Alex laughed again. "No, that's not what it means. It just means that I know the route between my house and yours well enough that I didn't think I would need a map. The roads are reasonably well marked with directions that I haven't found a need to use maps in this area." He paused for a moment before asking, "Why do you ask about maps? Have you learned to read them?"

The girl nodded vigorously. "Jonesy taught me," she said with a grin as her father made an exasperated sound, and the duchess fought to hide her smile.

Alex wasn't certain what was behind everyone's reactions, but he kept his focus on the girl and praised her abilities.

"What do you intend to do with this knowledge, my lady?"

"I'm not fully certain at this point, my lord. Jonesy and I were supposed to travel, but now she probably won't be able to," she said with a glower at her stepmother, leading Alex to the conclusion that the child was referring to the duchess.

"We'll still travel, darling," the duchess assured Adelina. "Now, we might not have the same constraints as we once might have. Just you wait. We'll speak of it another time, I promise."

The girl continued to stare at Alex with the lack of self-consciousness that seemed exclusive to children, making Alex want to check if he perhaps had a smudge on his cheek. He ought to have looked in the mirror before taking his seat.

Lady Graciela, apparently incapable of witnessing anyone's discomfort, stepped in once more. It was a fascinating quality to note about a young, *tonnish* woman. Alex was almost distracted by wondering over her unselfish concern.

"Perhaps his lordship would be able to tell you about his grand tour. That might satisfy your thirst for travel for a bit," the young woman pointed out, offering an encouraging smile to both him and the child.

"That was quite a while ago," Alex started, but the girl waved away his words.

"That's quite all right, my lord. You can tell me about your favourite place."

She was quite obviously a duke's daughter, with all the imperiousness that accompanied the position. He coughed a little to swallow the laughter bubbling up from inside. It was the lightest he had felt in ages. He was grateful to the child for the sensation and wished to reward the gift.

"I would have to say it's a tie between Paris and certain villages of the Rhine."

"Truly," the child demanded. "How could there be a tie? Aren't they terribly different from one another?"

"Oh yes, quite," he answered promptly, noticing from the corner of his eye the rapt attention both the duchess and her sister paid to his words. Alex tried not to grow too uncomfortable under the scrutiny. "But that's why it was a tie. In each their own way, I found them equally fascinating even though they were so different from one another. Paris, of course, is by far the most sophisticated. I didn't find the architecture so very different from what I'm familiar with in London, but the atmosphere there is just exactly what you would expect from the French. On the other hand, the villages of the Rhine were far more quaint and diverse than what we have in our own countryside. You will quite enjoy them when you get to see them for yourself."

Alex held his breath, hoping he hadn't opened up a parcel of trouble or ruin the evening, as the girl and her stepmother again exchanged speaking glances. They then turned their almost identical expressions upon the duke, causing him to hold up his hands and laugh.

"Sterling, I feel as though I'm going to owe you some sort of dreadful retaliation after this," he said, making Alex's heart sink at first, until he noticed the note of laughter in the duke's voice and the almost syrupy expression of love in his eyes as he regarded his wife and daughter.

Clearly, the duke wasn't holding a grudge. Alex relaxed back into the comfortable settee just as the butler came to call them for dinner.

Chapter Seven

Gracie wanted to shake her head at herself but, of course, she kept perfectly still. She shouldn't have stepped into the conversation Adelina was having with Lord Sterling. But the poor man had looked so nonplussed to be stared at in such a way. Grace made a mental note to tell the child she ought not do such a thing. She doubted Felicity would think of it.

It was amusing to note just how very different the two sisters were from one another. Not in looks, of course. Neither of them could really hide their heritage as Shertons. It was rather shocking that the usually very observant duke hadn't recognized Felicity when she joined his household as companion to his daughter. But when it came to temperament, they were such opposites, it was a wonder they got along so very well.

Lady Adelina's conversation with Lord Sterling was a perfect example. It hadn't seemed to strike Felicity as odd that Adelina questioned Lord Sterling in such a way. Nor that she stared at the man with such reckless abandon. Surely Felicity, even if she didn't wish to conform to Society's expectations, was sufficiently knowledgeable to steer her stepdaughter appropriately. Gracie didn't look forward to the conversation, but she was going to have to address the issue with her sister.

Thus resolved, she allowed her mind to drift back to what the earl had said in answer to Adelina's question about his Tour. It didn't sound as though he were as much of a gadabout as another one of their brothers-in-law, Ashford Northcott, but his lordship had obviously enjoyed what he had seen in his travels. If Grace wasn't quite so determined to remain firmly ensconced in the country, she would like to see the places he had mentioned, just from his description.

Perhaps, not Paris. If it were even more sophisticated than London, she was sure to feel out of place. But the villages of the Rhine sounded intriguing. That is, if one *had* a desire to see somewhere else, she might find them intriguing. Which she didn't. Glendale suited her just fine. Only, if she *did* have a desire to travel . . .

Grace gave her head a small shake. She was thinking herself in ridiculous circles.

"When did you arrive at Rathnelly?"

Grace almost started at the question, so wrapped up in her own thoughts was she. But she managed to hold onto her outward serenity

as she turned to face Lord Sterling.

"I've been here for two days, my lord."

"You didn't mention your plans when last we met."

Grace wondered why he sounded as though he were complaining. Did he think she had followed him? The thought filled her with mortification, but she rallied.

"Neither did you, in fact, my lord."

"I did mention I wished to speak with Rathnelly."

"True, but I didn't expect it would involve you immediately removing to take up camp upon his doorstep."

Perhaps, she was becoming a trifle defensive, but she didn't appreciate what his lordship might be insinuating. She had certainly *not* followed him there. But now, she felt badly that she had made them both uncomfortable. And she could see that the children were watching them with avid curiosity. If Felicity wasn't going to teach them proper manners, Grace needed to set an even better example than usual. She pasted a smile upon her face.

"How did you find your estate when you arrived, my lord? Will you be staying long in the area?"

She would have thought them perfectly innocent questions, so Grace was surprised when Lord Sterling cast her another dubious expression.

"There is work to be done on the estate, so I haven't yet decided how long I'll be in residence." His tone was far less friendly than usual, making Grace wish to frown at him, but instead she turned to Wickham.

"Are you looking forward to returning to school when the time comes? I know you were undecided how you felt about remaining at Rathnelly when last we spoke."

The boy's smile was thin, making Grace wonder if she had entirely lost her ability to converse. Was she going to make everyone within her vicinity uncomfortable that evening?

"I'm still of two minds about it, my lady," he answered with a scowl directed at his plate. Grace realized the problem. He wants to stay home but he considers such a wish to be childish. She supposed she could relate to his difficulty.

"I can understand that completely, so you aren't alone."

That brought both the boy's gaze as well as Lord Sterling's to focus on her face. Grace chose to ignore the other man and kept her attention firmly on her step-nephew.

"I struggle with the wish to never leave Glendale. Even when the duchess invited me to come, even though I longed to see her and all of you, I didn't want to leave home. But Mother made me. And I don't regret coming," she hastened to add. "But part of me wishes I was still

at home. So, I can imagine you must feel a little bit like that about school, right? I am fairly certain I understood from previous conversations that you enjoy school, but you don't necessarily want to leave here, either."

The boy nodded vigorously. Grace put her hand out to cover his elbow.

"At least you have the comforting knowledge that this is your place. You will always be welcome here." Grace said the last with the intention of making him feel better, but she was uncomfortably aware of Lord Sterling's gaze filling with sympathy. She tried her best to ignore it. "And school doesn't last forever. That might add to your conflicted feelings, I'm afraid, since you do enjoy it, but it might also be a comfort if you don't feel like you want to leave home."

"Thanks, Aunt Grace. That does help a little bit."

Grace's heart swelled at the boy's words. She was still new to being an aunt, but she was loving every minute of it. It was the best thing about Felicity's marriage. While it was true that she had other nephews and nieces, they were all newborns or barely toddling around. To be the aunt of a youngster she could converse with and get to know was the greatest joy. She couldn't wait until the others grew old enough to be interesting.

While in such a heightened state of emotions, Gracie knew it was a mistake to look at the visiting earl, but it seemed her eyes had a mind of their own. When her gaze met his, her heart nearly stopped beating in her chest. The look of empathy etched across his face made her want to find a wardrobe to hide in until he had grown bored with whatever had brought him to Rathnelly and she needn't ever risk seeing him again. The warmth that glowed in her midsection over his kind expression surely couldn't be healthy.

But she was a Sherton and as such, hiding was not an option. Lifting her chin as high as she could without appearing any more ridiculous than she already did, Grace forced her lips into a practiced smile of serenity and looked around the table to ascertain the state of everyone else present.

No one else had noticed the *contretemps*. That, at least, was a relief. If she couldn't get away with hiding from the earl, maybe she could at least ignore him. Felicity's household was obviously far from conventional, so she needn't concern herself that she would face a reprimand from that quarter. But when her eyes fell upon Adelina, Grace had to fight the urge to crumple. She couldn't set a poor example for the young girl, not when her stepmother wasn't likely to bother with such things.

Grace loved her sister fiercely, but she doubted Felicity would be able to steer the child toward a conventional future, even if she tried.

For the first time, Grace contemplated whether she ought to extend her visit with the Barringtons even further than her mother required.

She stifled her sigh. She was worse than Vicky in her efforts to keep everyone happy. The thought distracted her briefly from her own uncomfortable situation; their middle sister's awkward attempts at keeping the peace at all times had surprisingly led to a fairy tale marriage.

For the first time, Grace wondered if such a fairy tale were possible for her. Indeed, she'd never desired one. But Grace had no evidence there was a fairy godmother waiting to pour out blessings upon her. No, Grace felt certain if she were to ever find her own happy ending, she would have to achieve it for herself.

Grace allowed her gaze to meet Lord Sterling's once more and was thrilled to see that he now looked more puzzled than empathetic. Puzzled she could handle. She had been puzzling people most of her life, so it wasn't much of a bother. The smile that suddenly graced her face felt far more genuine than it had previously.

"You've been quiet, Easton," Grace finally prompted. "What have you been keeping busy with this summer?"

The boy offered her a rather shy smile in answer to her question before it suddenly widened into a grin. "I've been trying to keep up with Gardner, Adelina, and Jonesy."

Grace found it amusing that the children still referred to Felicity in the manner that Adelina had adopted when Felicity was there under the guise of Felicity Jones, paid companion. The duke didn't much care for it, but he hadn't yet insisted that the children find something else to call their stepmother. Grace supposed it was an awkward situation for the children. What were they to call her? Your Grace would be rather formal for the unconventional young woman, who wasn't terribly much older than they were. It seemed easier for the children to call her "aunt" than it was for them to call Felicity "Mother." Perhaps if there were a new babe in the house, who would by nature call their father's wife mother, it would ease the way. In the meantime, calling her 'Jonesy' seemed to amuse rather than offend Felicity, so Grace didn't consider it worth even mentioning. It was clearly a term of endearment from the children.

Her mind bounced back toward the earl, and Grace grew convinced that she was being ridiculous. She tried to distract herself by thinking about anything but him. But her efforts seemed to have the opposite effect.

The thought suddenly occurred to her. What if the earl wasn't opposed to Felicity's matchmaking efforts? Grace thought back to all her previous interactions with Lord Sterling. It didn't take long, as there weren't all that many.

She supposed, having been raised in a noble family, she had been aware of the earl's family from the beginning of time. But she had only encountered the man a handful of times. She didn't even know all that much about him, aside from the facts that he was well reputed, danced well, and was ridiculously handsome. Grace supposed, if she would be forced to marry someday, she could do far worse than him.

But despite the kind eyes he had temporarily made at her, he hadn't really indicated any sort of marked interest. In fact, the one time he had called, he had only been interested in learning more about Rathnelly.

Suddenly, Grace was looking at the man in a far different light. He couldn't very well be trying to set up a flirtation with the recently married duchess, could he? The thought horrified her before she quickly dismissed it. Rathnelly was sitting right there; surely the man wasn't that daft.

"You didn't mention what sort of work you were going to take up on your estate, my lord," Grace prompted, as she noticed the conversation lagging around the table. "Are there repairs or renovations you intend to make?"

She had considered it an innocent topic, but she should have guessed from the way he had side-stepped it earlier that it wasn't so simple. He surprised her by sighing heavily.

"That is one of the things I was hoping to discuss with you, Your Grace," Lord Sterling said, shifting his gaze between Grace and the duke. "I have had to terminate my steward's employment quite suddenly and haven't any connections in the area to hire a new one. I could send someone from Lakewood, I suppose, or hire someone in Town, but I was of a mind to find someone local, who would be happy for the position close to home."

Rathnelly, never one to respond quickly, looked at Lord Sterling for a long moment. "Sounds like a complicated situation," he commented dryly before he exchanged speaking expressions with his wife. "I might know of one or two individuals who would consider the position. Perhaps, we can discuss it in a little more detail after the meal," he concluded with a smile toward his children. "While Wickham and Easton are doing their best to learn the details of running a large estate, they may not appreciate this level of discussion over dinner."

"Of course, Your Grace," Lord Sterling replied promptly, appearing suddenly uncomfortable.

Grace once more felt responsible, as it was her question that had prompted the topic. She encompassed the entire table as she glanced around with what she was sure was an awkward smile upon her face.

“My apologies, everyone. It would appear my curiosity got the better of me once more.”

The earl had a strange expression upon his face that she couldn't interpret, but Gracie chose to ignore it rather than stare at him long enough to figure it out. Such staring could only alert Felicity and give her the wrong impression. Grace would never be able to convince her sister to cease in her efforts at matching them up if the duchess had any suspicion that an attraction was present.

Chapter Eight

Alex hoped his confusion wasn't evident upon his features as he gazed at Lady Graciela. Why would she apologize like that? Taking responsibility had always been his role. He had never encountered a woman who would do it voluntarily like that. It really wasn't her fault that he was embarrassed about allowing the deceit to take place at his estate. He ought to have visited and reviewed his ledgers long before now. He couldn't begin to fathom why the woman would accept the rebuke from Rathnelly that had rightly been directed toward him.

But staring at her wasn't getting him any answers, and that wasn't why he had accepted the invitation for dinner no matter how fascinating he might find her. He needed to remember the purpose of his visit.

How could he get Rathnelly to allow him to invest in his operations? Or how could he come up with some ideas of his own if the duke wouldn't allow it after all?

The conversation continued to flow around him while he remained wrapped up in his own thoughts. No one seemed to notice that he wasn't being the best guest. But he couldn't help being jealous of the obvious closeness amongst the family members. Lady Graciela and the duchess were remarkably friendly with one another, despite their evident differences in temperament. Alex wondered if it was different for girls. He had never seen any of his friends being that friendly with their brothers. But then his gaze shifted toward the duke's sons, and he remarked upon their evident friendliness, too. Perhaps it was the air at Rathnelly, he thought, with the first touch of whimsy he had experienced since his own boyhood. No, he corrected himself. He seemed to be always whimsical when he was near Lady Grace. All the more reason to avoid the woman, who couldn't seem to stray far from his thoughts.

But then, perhaps he could use all the friendliness at Rathnelly to his advantage. He would have to enter the conversation more fully and see what he could manage. It was obvious to even his untrained eye that the duchess was the centre of all that was taking place. Even Lady Graciela had told him to apply to her for access to the household. His focus narrowed upon her especially when he took note of the two sisters seemingly having a silent conversation with expressive eyes and emphatic head shakes. At least, on the side of Lady Graciela. Alex had the strangest sensation that he was the subject of their silent conversation. He stifled his smile of triumph.

“Your Grace, it is evident you have already put your touch on the house since I was here for your wedding.” He had hoped to be complimentary, but the duchess appeared suddenly uncomfortable at his words.

“Well, I haven’t done much, Lord Sterling, although it’s kind of you to say so. Every woman needs to feel that she’s made a house her home. And, of course, Rathnelly is a little too busy to pay too much attention to decorations and such.”

“Of course,” Alex said as smoothly as he could muster. He hadn’t realized this might be a touchy subject. The duke must have sensed a shift in the air. Alex watched as his gaze moved around the table quickly before resting on his wife. He then turned his perceptive stare upon his guest.

“My wife has taken over management of my life, and it is the best thing that has happened to any of us. She has done a lovely job of straightening up the House.”

The duke’s words brought a hot blush to his wife’s face, and she frowned in response.

“You weren’t supposed to have noticed, Your Grace.”

Rathnelly’s eyes widened, and a quiet chuckle escaped him. “I have lived my entire life here, my dear, I’m sure you realize.”

Alex didn’t think it was possible, but the duchess’s blush deepened even further. He was reasonably sure it was embarrassment making her uncomfortable, not anger or anything else truly awful, but he thought he ought to turn the subject to lessen the moment, just the same. Before he could, Lady Graciela did it for him. He was beginning to see a pattern in her behaviour, and it intrigued him.

“Felicity, I must ask, have you any idea what your cook does to make the roast so very tender? Please, don’t tell Mother I’ve commented on it, but I think our cook could benefit from a suggestion or two.”

The duchess looked at her sister as though the younger woman had lost her mind, but then a smile broke across her face and she shrugged. “I haven’t thought to ask, but we could venture our way to the kitchens tomorrow and find out.”

“That would be delightful,” the lady replied with a wide smile, one out of proportion to the subject, from Alex’s point of view. He stopped himself just in time before he shook his head over the vagaries of females.

Then he caught the flicker of Lady Graciela’s gaze, and he realized that once again, the lady was making an attempt to make things comfortable for him and everyone else at the table. What a strange lady she was. Not at all what he was used to encountering amongst the *ton*.

Not that it much mattered. He needed to speak with the duke, not fixate upon the man's sister-in-law, he reminded himself for at least the fifth time that evening. He wasn't interested in a Society maiden was another reminder he gave himself as he enjoyed the last of his well-cooked dinner, no matter how appealing she might be.

But how to bring it up? Perhaps, when the ladies left them to their port.

"Sterling, you won't mind if we have our port together with the ladies in the salon, will you?"

Rathnelly worded it as a question but was already on his feet, following his wife from the room before Alex could even consider a response.

He noticed that Lady Grace was hovering in her seat, watching him from the corner of her eye as he stared after the rest of the retreating diners.

"Are you having difficulty adjusting to the tempest that is my sister's household, my lord?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Not at all. The Barringtons are delightful."

"Well of course they are. That was not in question," she replied with the most asperity he had heard from her.

"I have never experienced a delightful tempest," Alex returned drily as he headed for the door himself, prepared to chase after the duke if he had to.

"That is unfortunate for you, in that case, my lord," she answered, not at all chastened by his remarks. She didn't bother saying anything further, as she followed the rest of the family and then settled beside her sister with a basket of needlework.

"Do you play any instruments, Lord Sterling?" the duchess asked as the footman was serving him from a decanter.

"I play the pianoforte with moderate skill. I could never settle down long enough to practice sufficiently to excel at it, I'm afraid."

"Would you be able to perform a duet with my sister?"

Even he, with his limited experience interpreting female reactions, could tell Lady Graciela did not appreciate her sister's suggestion.

"Oh, no, I'm sure his lordship didn't expect to play this evening. You shouldn't tease him thusly, Felicity." Lady Grace said it in a pleasant tone, but Alex had to bite back his amusement when she sent her sister a fierce glare.

Alex was unsure how best to proceed. He felt a twinge of conscience over how Lady Graciela might feel on the subject, but he was there to curry favour with the Barringtons, not her, so he pasted a smile on his face and nodded to the duchess.

"As I said, my skills are merely moderate, and I have had little

experience with duets, but I'm willing to give it a try, if her ladyship will join me."

The expression upon Lady Grace's face was priceless and amusing as the kittenish woman tried to frown him into submission while also attempting to not make anyone else uncomfortable. A soft pink flush covered whatever of her skin he could see. Alex ignored how attractive he found her, reminding himself once more that she was a woman of Society and thus unreliable and not in the least trustworthy. Trust and reliability were both qualities he valued highly.

"I do apologize in advance for the assault that is about to happen upon your senses," she murmured to the room at large, as she approached the large instrument in the room.

"Is there a piece in particular that you think we ought to try?" she asked him once she had finally finished fidgeting with her skirts and settled by his side.

"As I told you, I have little experience with duets."

"Bach has a few Sonatas designed specifically for four hands," she explained quietly as she shuffled the papers before them. "I believe the children might have been playing one earlier, so it should be right here."

He noticed a slight tremor in her hands and wondered about it but was too preoccupied with his own nerves to concern himself overly with hers. In truth, Alex was too busy wondering if the duke would be pleased or irritated with his presence and entertainment value to worry over much else.

"Why did you have to agree to this?" she finally whispered under her voice, even as she placed the papers appropriately and arranged herself. Alex didn't think she was awaiting an answer, which was a relief as he didn't have one he could share with her. He certainly wouldn't have been able to explain the sense of anticipation that swept through him as he followed her lead, holding his fingers steady on the keys, watching from the corner of his eye as she took a deep breath and then nodded curtly.

Almost as though they had been practicing for years, the music flowed effortlessly, and Alex was taken away from his current concerns for the few minutes it took them to complete the short piece she had chosen.

Everyone applauded even as the duchess complained.

"Gracie, my dearest, you should have chosen a longer piece."

At his side, the previously angry young woman merely smiled pleasantly. "You wouldn't have said that if it had been dreadful, Felicity."

To Alex's relief, the duke laughed over his sister-in-law's words and clapped Alex on the shoulder.

“That was well done of you, Sterling. Thank you for being a good sport. Now, shall we leave the women and children for a few minutes? It will give us a chance to discuss your estate and anything else you’ve been hoping to bring up with me.”

An uncharacteristic thrill went through Alex when the duke quirked his eyebrow in a knowing glance. *Is he going to give me another chance to argue my case?* Despite his hopes, the back of his neck grew uncomfortably warm when Alex realized that all eyes were upon him, but he was delighted that the duke had taken the initiative. He simply nodded and followed the other man from the room.

He was just starting to feel himself relaxing as he sank into the chair Rathnelly had indicated in front of the duke’s desk when he caught the other man’s steely gaze fixed firmly upon him. It almost arrested his movement into the seat, but he managed to collect himself and carry on as though nothing untoward were happening. *But why is the duke staring at me so?* Alex resolved to hold his council and wait for Rathnelly to speak first.

It was a challenge as the other man seemed determined to make him uncomfortable with his silent stare. Finally, without notice, a grin broke out on the duke’s face.

“You are very good at keeping your cool, aren’t you, Sterling?”

Alex had no idea how to respond to that, so he merely continued waiting.

The duke sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Very well, my lord, tell me why you wanted to see me. I know you tried to tell me earlier, but it wasn’t the right time. My clerks also mentioned something, but I’d rather hear directly from you.”

Alex made a concerted effort to suppress the frown he could feel forming on his forehead. It wouldn’t do to offend the man now, just as he was finally getting his audience, but Alex wasn’t sure why Rathnelly was being so very coy. Either he would allow him to invest or he wouldn’t; why did it have to be such a production? Alex cleared his throat and hoped he didn’t appear as nervous as he felt.

“I know you dismissed my inquiry on my initial visit, but I would appreciate an opportunity to join your horse breeding enterprise,” Alex finally said, as clearly and simply as he could manage. He waited for the duke’s reaction. If it were possible, Rathnelly became even more still and watchful.

“My clerks said as much after your written enquiry, and I did try to gently dissuade your interest previously, but you must know I have my reasons for hesitation. What do you feel you have to offer to the operations, Sterling? Do you have any experience?”

“I have money to contribute, and I have a couple horses that I think might do well. But no, I don’t have any direct experience in the

horse trade.”

Rathnelly continued staring at him, steadily causing Alex to feel fidgety, but he tried hard not to squirm. Finally, the man spoke again.

“Might I ask what makes you think I’m involved in the horse trade?”

The question made Alex blink. The duke’s tone and emphasis implied that he wasn’t, in fact, involved in breeding excellent and expensive horse flesh.

“Is it not common knowledge, Your Grace?”

“No, it is not,” Rathnelly replied curtly, making Alex frown and stare.

“I thought it was. I cannot say I’ve heard it discussed often, but I was sure I had heard of it from more than one source. To be sure, the man I bought my last horse from mentioned it.”

Rathnelly’s stare was even more glacial. “And who might that have been?”

“Roy Smith, a contact I made when I was touring Tattersalls. Do you know him?”

“It isn’t exactly a name that stands out, is it?”

His stomach churned, and his palms started to sweat as Alex suddenly felt as though he ought to defend himself. Against what, he wasn’t sure.

“Did you go to this man’s stables?”

“No, he described the horses he had and when I expressed an interest in one, he brought it to me.”

“In London, at your country seat, or your property near here?”

“He brought the horse to Oakwood.”

The silence stretched between them again before the duke asked, “Did you buy the horse?”

Alex felt his first smile in what felt an age. “I did, Your Grace, and such a charming little mare, she is.”

“Is this one of the horses you thought you could offer for my use?”

Alex laughed slightly. “I might not know much, but even I know that isn’t likely to be a good idea. Unless you thought so, and then, absolutely, I would be willing to do so.”

Rathnelly frowned, and Alex quailed.

“Why are you that eager to join me in this alleged enterprise you think I’m involved in? Surely, you know it’s exceedingly vulgar.”

Alex stared at his host. “Why would you say it’s vulgar, Your Grace? And why are you so evasive on the subject? Either you are or you aren’t in the business.”

“Everyone knows that going into trade is vulgar, Sterling. Surely, your father taught you that.”

Alex refused to give in to the embarrassment the other man's words caused him.

"I am my own man, Rathnelly. I am sufficiently well placed in Society that I care very little what others may think. It is for me to decide what is vulgar behaviour for myself, not Society in general."

"You might find that you are quite misled in your thoughts, my lord, I am afraid. Many in our Society are not so liberal in their thinking."

"Have you truly found that to be so?" Alex couldn't imagine anyone having the nerve to censor the duke for anything, let alone for going into business.

"I have. I'm surprised that you have not."

Alex shrugged. "Well, I haven't yet indulged in my desire to go into trade."

"And just what exactly inspired such a desire? If I understand it correctly, your pockets are sufficiently deep and full that you shouldn't need to bother."

Alex shrugged again. "I inherited a surprisingly well run estate, despite my father's incompetence, and have managed to improve upon what I received. I haven't paid as close attention to some of my other properties as perhaps I ought to have, but I find that there is only so much you can do with our traditional sources of income. I don't want to be restricted to what has been or what our fathers did. There are so many new and wonderful things, surely they must be taken advantage of."

"You sound a little bit like my wife, Sterling."

"I take that as a compliment, as your wife strikes me as an intelligent woman."

"That she is," Rathnelly replied with a gentle softening of his features. "But tell me again who this horse trader was that you had dealings with. I will have to look into him."

Alex's eyebrows lowered. "So, does this mean that you will or you will not allow me to invest?"

To his surprise, the duke grinned at him. "You are persistent, that much I can give you." The duke's grin didn't last long as he suddenly pinned Alex with another assessing stare. "Are you able to keep your own counsel and keep secrets?"

"Very well able, Your Grace."

"Give me an example."

"That wouldn't be keeping the secret, would it, now?" Alex wanted to do whatever was necessary to get the man to agree, but he wasn't about to spill his guts before the other noble, no matter what the cause.

"You aren't too stupid, then, are you, Sterling? Very well, I can

see that wasn't the fairest question I could have asked you. But how can I know that I can trust you? We really know very little about one another."

"Surely, you've known me forever."

"I've known of you, but I cannot claim to a close acquaintance."

Rathnelly's words made Alex squirm a little in his seat. He couldn't really argue with that. What did he know of the duke? Truly, not a great deal. He never would have thought this would be so very difficult. And he certainly hadn't thought it was a secret. A secret the duke had yet to truly confirm or deny. Alex wondered if he had been duped by the horse trader.

"I could show you the horse," he offered. "Beyond that, I don't really know how I might prove to you that I speak the truth."

"That might be a good idea, Sterling. But you mentioned she is a mare. I wouldn't want her coming all this way if she was ready to foal."

"No, of course not. It hasn't yet been her time," he excused, still feeling bewildered by the developments their conversation had brought.

"I will need to go up to London and check on a few things. Perhaps, I could stop off at your estate on my way home."

"It isn't exactly on your way, Your Grace," Alex protested.

"I am well aware of the geography, Sterling, but it is less out of my way than making a special trip. You wouldn't have to be there to entertain me. In fact, I would probably be more comfortable examining the horse if you were not there."

Alex was, by now, so uncomfortable with the conversation that he just wanted it to be over; he was even wishing he had never conceived of the idea of investing in Rathnelly's ventures. He had heard interesting things regarding the development of steam engines. He ought to have thought to put his money there. But it was a little too late to think of that. He was in with the duke now, whether he wanted to be or not. Before he could formulate an answer, the duke carried on with a different subject.

"You also mentioned your need for a steward. I have two clerks who might appreciate the position. I could have them come to you or you could speak to them here."

Alex was beginning to wonder if he wanted anything to do with Rathnelly, so overwhelmed he was by the duke's bullish manner, but he did require a steward at the earliest opportunity. It wouldn't hurt him to speak to the duke's candidates.

"I would appreciate your recommendation, Your Grace," he managed to choke out, resenting the amusement he saw in the duke's eyes.

Chapter Nine

Grace tried not to be overly preoccupied with what her brother-in-law might be saying to Lord Sterling. She was reasonably sure the duke had no intention of joining his wife in her matchmaking efforts, but the worry still niggled at the back of her mind. She would be mortified, if that were the case.

With a slight shake of her head, Grace rid herself of the ridiculous thought. Rathnelly was far too busy with more important things to meddle with such matters. But she still turned to her sister with a gimlet eye.

“Felicity Sherton Barrington, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Could you not figure out a way to be a wee bit less obvious about your intentions?”

Felicity tried to look innocent, but it was not her best strength. Instead, she finally just laughed.

“Gracie, my dearest, I am of the opinion that Lord Sterling would be perfect for you. You can hardly blame me for trying to nudge him along a trifle.”

“I can, and I do,” Grace responded as calmly as she could muster, despite her uncharacteristic urge to rail at her sister. She was relieved the children had been excused at the same time that the gentlemen left the room. She didn’t want them witnessing their mother and aunt having a disagreement.

“But why? You have known me your entire life. Surely, you must fully realize that I cannot ignore my best impulses.”

“I do know that, Felicity, but this is not one of your best impulses. It was fully a different matter when your ideas and adventures involved yourself. But now, you are bent on sticking your managing ways into my affairs, and that is where you must draw the line.”

“But Grace, he is perfect.”

Gracie shook her head emphatically. “For one thing, I haven’t the first idea what you are basing this assessment of perfection upon, since I’m reasonably sure you don’t know him very well. And for another, it would matter little even if you *did* know him well enough to make such a judgment. My life is my affair. I do not wish to wed, certainly not to an arrogant man such as Lord Sterling.”

Felicity’s frown demonstrated her lack of comprehension. “But Gracie, he is perfect,” she insisted. “Perfect for you. I knew it the instant we met. And marriage is perfect.” The love-addled sigh that followed Felicity’s declaration made Gracie roll her eyes.

“Felicity,” Grace began with a small laugh. “Who is this imposter in my sister’s likeness? I have never known you to be so positive. And to wax so extreme on two separate subjects at once. It is very unlike you.”

Felicity grinned. “Marriage agrees with me, my dear.”

Gracie returned her sister’s smile, reaching out to squeeze her hand gently. “I know, Felicity. And I also know that is why you think I ought to join you in the wedded state. But just as you were determined to forge your own path in life, you must afford me the same privilege. Is it not for me to decide if I wish to marry and to whom? It is not for you to try to force a gentleman into courting me. You know full well Lord Sterling is not known as a man who courts. It is unlikely he will start with me. And it’s embarrassing me for you to even try. It is unseemly and perfectly mortifying.”

Felicity stared at Gracie, clearly torn between her reactions. Grace held her breath, waiting to see on which side of the issue her sister would land. She had pulled on all the appropriate strings to elicit a reaction from Felicity, but Grace couldn’t say for certain how her sister would react. Felicity had taken to married life in ways Grace couldn’t have predicted, and it seemed her new role as stepmother had only fuelled her managing ways. But reminding Felicity of her own determination to arrange the best life for herself might have touched her. If this didn’t work, Grace could only hope the earl was called away on urgent business back to his usual haunts, so he wouldn’t be within reach of Felicity’s machinations.

Finally, Felicity nodded. “I can see your point, Gracie, but could you at least promise me to consider him as a possible match? And why wouldn’t he start with you? Any gentleman would be lucky to have you to wife. I know you say you don’t wish to marry, but you haven’t really offered a satisfactory explanation as to why you would wish to persist in that endeavour. I think you ought to at least consider it. If you were the more adventurous type, I would understand it better. As it is, I’m surprised you would wish to be so unconventional. And I don’t think Sterling is so terribly arrogant, either.”

Gracie crossed her arms before she realized how defensive that made her look and tried to relax her stance. She didn’t want to argue with Felicity, and she didn’t wish to discuss the matter further. She would have to be satisfied with her sister’s offer to stem her matchmaking efforts.

“I will think about it, Felicity, thank you. I know your actions are motivated out of concern for me, and I do appreciate that. But I think, in this case, you are going to have to leave it to me.”

Felicity sighed dramatically before allowing her grin to spread. “Very well, but promise me you’ll tell me what conclusions you’ve

come to *after* you've thought about it."

Grace laughed, feeling safe in making such a promise. "Very well. I promise I'll tell you my conclusions, but I cannot promise they will be to your liking."

Felicity laughed, too. "I suppose that's fair." There was a brief pause. Grace watched as her sister tried to compose her expression into one of innocence.

"I must say, the two of you did perform the duet quite well, especially for two people who had never played together before."

Grace laughed again, hearing a tinge of hysteria in it that could not be helped. "I can see how difficult it is for a tiger to change its stripes."

Felicity appeared taken aback by her sister's words but then joined her in laughter.

"Very well. My apologies. I will try harder to desist."

"I could give you something else to think about, if you'd like," Gracie began gently, still not comfortable with addressing what she had noticed about Adelina's behaviour. Her disquiet must have been evident as Felicity immediately became watchful.

"What did you have in mind?"

Grace cleared her throat, hoping Felicity didn't think she was suddenly becoming critical as retribution. But the subject needed to be addressed; now or later wouldn't make much difference.

"I noticed that Adelina was quite bold in her address of the earl. It seemed to me that it made his lordship uncomfortable. I thought I ought to mention it to you, as she is in that tricky stage where she is no longer a little girl but obviously far from making her curtsy to Society. If you haven't done so already, I think it time to begin her training on what are acceptable social interactions."

Felicity stared at Gracie for a moment before her face appeared to crumple. "Oh, dear heavens, Grace, do say it isn't so. I have feared that I am too unconventional to be able to steer her correctly."

"Don't get yourself into a taking, my dear, there's plenty of time. And while it is true that you have chosen to be unconventional, I cannot accept that you do not know what is the correct form of behaviour. It is for you and His Grace to decide what you consider acceptable and teach your children accordingly. But even if you decide that you consider some things acceptable that Society in general might not, it would behove you to help Adelina see the differences, so that her way is more comfortable when she does enter Society."

Felicity continued to stare at her little sister. "How did you come to be so wise?"

Grace laughed and shrugged. "I've had some wonderful role

models to follow. One that I can think of in particular,” she added fondly, as she once again reached out to squeeze her sister’s hand. “Don’t take it too much to heart. I doubt Sterling even really remarked upon it. But I was feeling particularly sensitive and noticed. I am sure you will know just what to do.”

Felicity didn’t appear completely appeased but nodded in acceptance of her sister’s words.

“Thank you for coming to visit us, Gracie. Do say you can extend your stay. I think it will do all of us some good.”

Gracie felt a qualm of nerves over her sister’s words, but there was truly no reason for her not to accept. “Of course, I’ll stay,” was the only possible answer, and she said it with as much goodwill as she could muster, unable to explain, even to herself, why she would hesitate in the least.

By the next afternoon, it was obvious she had made the right choice.

Rathnelly had ridden out first thing in the morning before Grace had even risen from her bed, so she had no opportunity to bid her brother-in-law farewell. The rest of the household was in an uproar by the time Gracie emerged from her bedchamber.

“What is afoot?” she asked the butler as servants seemed to quiver about the house.

“His young lordship, Easton, has taken ill. The nursery staff didn’t think to disturb Their Graces with the information until after His Grace had already left the House. Now, Her Grace is in the nursery worrying herself ill over the children.”

Gracie stared at the servant, wondering how she ought to proceed. Clearly, some direction was needed. She didn’t feel in the least qualified to run Rathnelly, but if her sister was too distracted to do it, she would have to take over.

“Mr. Carter, I am fully confident in your ability to straighten things out amongst the staff. I can understand their worry for the boy, but it is unlikely to be anything too serious. Children get sick all the time. Surely, it cannot be such a rare occurrence here with three of them in residence.”

“I mean no disrespect in contradicting you, but it is exceedingly rare, my lady, as the children haven’t been in residence for very long, and the entire household is that upset.”

Gracie nibbled on her lip in indecision for the briefest moment but feeling the hopeful gaze of the butler upon her, she nodded firmly and set to work.

“Very well, Mr. Carter. I can understand everyone’s concern, in that case, but that doesn’t change the fact that Their Graces will be relying upon the staff all the more, especially if there is reason to be

concerned. So, you must offer some words of encouragement to those under you and assure them that their efforts are most needed. I will run up to the nursery and confer with my sister. We can then determine what our best course of action might be.”

To her surprise, the older man appeared to visibly relax. Grace had the impression that he had just been waiting for someone to tell him what to do. Now that Gracie had taken charge, all was right in the man’s world, and he would do as she had bidden. It was more responsibility than Grace had ever taken on, but it wasn’t completely out of her realm of experience. While Rathnelly was far larger than Glendale, it wasn’t that much different. With Felicity’s attention elsewhere and their mother focused on her new-born son, Grace had assumed many of their mother’s responsibilities over the past few years. It shouldn’t be that difficult to oversee a few things at Rathnelly, should the need arise. With that thought, she bolstered her nerves and hurried up the stairs to check with her sister.

“My lady, you cannot go in there.” The footman stopped her just as she was about to enter the nursery suite.

“I beg your pardon?” She shouldn’t have spoken sharply to the poor young man, as he appeared near to a breakdown for speaking so harshly to her.

“My sincerest apologies, my lady, but Her Grace has said no one is to enter. She doesn’t know yet what has befallen Lord Easton, and she fears it might be catching.”

“Has someone been sent to collect the doctor?” Grace asked, as calmly as she could.

“Yes, my lady. A footman went out about half an hour ago.”

“Very well, then. We shan’t get ourselves in a taking until the doctor has told us whether or not we ought to be concerned. Are you certain my sister meant to include me in the edict that no one should enter?”

The young footman nodded. “She mentioned you specifically, my lady. She said you ought to knock on the door, and she’ll tell you what to do through it.”

Grace fought her amusement over that. Even in her distress, her sister was as bossy as ever. “Thank you, Thomas. I will do just that.”

She hesitated briefly as she hovered outside the door, wondering if she ought to knock hard or be gentle. She started with a light tap, not wanting to disturb young Easton if he was resting. Felicity must have been hovering nearby as she responded almost immediately.

“Is that you, Gracie?”

“It is me. I’m sorry to hear Easton is feeling poorly.”

“The poor mite is terribly sick.”

“Are you holding up all right?” Gracie thought to ask,

remembering that her sister wasn't the best person to have in a sickroom, as she was the picture of health and had no patience for illness in herself. Grace couldn't imagine that her sister would have patience for it in someone else, either.

"I am as right as rain," came Felicity's seemingly cheerful response. "I'm terribly sorry to have to leave you to your own devices, though, Gracie. I do hope you don't mind entertaining yourself for the day. Until we know fully what we're dealing with, I wouldn't want to leave the children on their own, nor do I want to risk the rest of the household."

"Do not trouble yourself about the rest of us. We shall manage just fine, I'm sure." Grace turned to offer an encouraging smile to the hovering footman. "Can we bring you anything?"

"No, no, Grace, do not you trouble yourself. The servants are taking great care of us. I just hope you can manage on your own for a while."

"I shall be perfectly fine, I promise." She paused for a beat before adding, "I will check back with you later."

"That sounds fine, but you really ought to stay away from the nursery to be sure you don't catch whatever this might be."

"I will wait until Easton has been visited by the doctor. Then we can decide what ought to be done."

Grace was fairly certain her sister was already elsewhere in her thoughts, as she merely murmured in the affirmative, her voice fading as she likely moved away from the door. She certainly didn't blame Felicity. Grace wouldn't have even started the conversation with her sister except that she had felt compelled to check on the situation.

As she descended back to the main floor, Grace worried that others might have been exposed to whatever was ailing poor Easton. Rathnelly had left but might perhaps be ill. Lord Sterling had been there all the previous evening. She wondered if she ought to send word to either gentleman. Putting the thought from her mind for the moment, she resolved to address the issue, if it was needed, after the doctor had been by.

It took very little time for Grace to check in with both the butler and housekeeper to ascertain whether there was anything she needed to take care of. It hadn't even been a few hours since Felicity had closed herself in with the children and the household servants, after their initial panicked reaction, were carrying on as normal. It seemed to Grace that her sister had established a good routine with the servants, and everyone would be able to carry on with their usual activities. It left her with little to do, and she tried not to agonize over matters as she debated what to do with herself as they awaited the doctor.

What could possibly be taking the man so long?

Despite her best intentions, Grace couldn't keep herself from worrying, but a quick glance at the clock told her that very little time had passed. She needed to find something to keep herself occupied. Even though it was far from her favourite activity, Grace found her needlework and determined to accomplish something useful.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, but was really less than an hour, the doctor arrived.

It seemed to Gracie as though the entire household were holding their collective breath, awaiting the doctor's verdict on little Easton's heath. Finally, after what felt like another eternity, but was most likely only about fifteen minutes, the doctor emerged from the nursery suite declaring an outbreak of the measles. Involuntarily, Grace stepped back from the doctor. She couldn't remember if she'd had the childhood disease herself and certainly had no wish to contract it now. It was a serious illness and could even be deadly. Felicity had been right to remain sequestered with the children. She only hoped it hadn't spread to anyone else in the household. She would have to have a footman ride out to warn Lord Sterling and contact the duke. They ought to be warned to watch for symptoms and perhaps reduce their contact with others, just in case. It might not be common practice to be so cautious, but it seemed to be common sense to Gracie.

For the rest of the day, Grace moved through the large house in a bit of a daze, dealing with any household management questions the servants had and overseeing a steady provision of supplies to the nursery wing. According to Felicity, the children were keeping themselves well occupied and so far, only Easton was ill. The doctor had warned, though, that it was likely all three would contract the illness within days.

Sure enough, they were all varying degrees of sick by the next morning. Grace was relieved to hear that Felicity was still well. That led them to believe that perhaps she and Grace had survived the illness when they were younger. But Felicity still wouldn't leave the children and wouldn't allow Grace to join them.

"It's not worth the risk, Gracie dear, surely you realize that. And you shouldn't return home to Glendale either in case you're ill and don't realize. It wouldn't do to bring the illness to little Augustus."

With a sigh, Grace acknowledged the wisdom of Felicity's words, but she was more bored than she'd ever thought possible. She had never had so little to do before. If she were at Glendale, there would be all manner of things for her to do but here, and under the circumstances, she couldn't very well ride out and visit Rathnelly's tenants or any of the surrounding gentry.

Before long though, Gracie wished she could be bored again.

It all started with the basket.

In later, less fraught, moments, Grace would acknowledge that the basket really had nothing to do with it and it all had, of course, begun long before she was even aware. But for her, it certainly felt like the basket had started it all.

Within a very short time of Gracie sending word to Lord Sterling about Easton's illness, a carriage arrived from Oakwood delivering a large basket of treats. While she was certain it was his servants who had done the work, it was kind of the earl to think to arrange it.

Clearly, you're being affected by your boredom, Grace thought to herself with an inward eyeroll, if you're becoming so charitable toward the man from such a gesture. Undeterred by her internal sarcasm, Gracie quickly dashed off a note of thanks to Lord Sterling before she took the basket up to the nursery wing for the children to enjoy, stealing a biscuit or two for herself before she left the lot with the footman to pass along to Felicity and her patients.

When she returned to the first floor, it was to find that the servants appeared, once again, to be in a quandary. Grace was instantly concerned when they all turned to her with anxious, expectant gazes.

"What has happened?" She hoped her exasperation wasn't evident. Rathnelly usually seemed like a seamlessly run household, so she was surprised to find the servants so overcome.

But then the butler held out the note.

Grace stared at it without comprehension.

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Her gaze flickered between the seemingly innocuous paper and the butler's worried expression.

"I'm afraid I require an explanation," Gracie finally said.

"This was on the kitchen door," the butler said.

"With a knife," one of the footmen added with a touch of glee before the butler's glare caused him to subside into silence.

The butler sighed. "This is actually the third note this week, my lady. The first two were easily dismissed. This one, too, doesn't seem so very threatening, except for the big knife that was with it. But altogether with the others, we're regretting that we never said anything to His Grace. And now, we don't know what to do."

Grace blinked away her inertia. She hadn't a clue what to do either. Felicity would probably enjoy the mystery, but under the circumstances, Grace didn't think she ought to tell her anything until she knew a little more. Perhaps, she ought to send for another family member. But with the threat of measles and all her family with young children, she couldn't take that risk. Her thoughts immediately shifted

to Lord Sterling. A part of her didn't want to involve him while another tantalized her with the thought of his comforting presence.

If anything, it would certainly alleviate her boredom.

Chapter Ten

Alex hadn't been able to stop thinking about Lady Grace. He tried to tell himself it was only the Barringtons he was thinking about, but it was her face that kept returning to the forefront of his mind's eye, so he knew he was lying to himself. Even as he contemplated his potential investment in Rathnelly's schemes, he couldn't stop remembering the evening spent in the lovely young woman's company.

And so it was with no regret that he found himself in front of Rathnelly's front door, raising his hand to knock, even as it was pulled open by an attentive servant.

"Good afternoon, my lord." The butler bowed and welcomed him. "I am afraid the household is currently at sixes and sevens. Her Grace is unavailable to receive guests."

"I understand completely," Alex replied. "I received word about Lord Easton's illness. But I also received a note from Lady Graciela asking that I visit."

"I will see if she is available to receive you now, my lord. Would you mind waiting in the Yellow Salon?"

Without really awaiting a reply, the butler left Alex to his own devices, hurrying off to direct a footman to confer with the lady. He wasn't left waiting long, though, as Lady Grace presented herself much quicker than he expected.

"My lord, thank you so much for attending me. I hope it wasn't an imposition. Have you had the measles?"

Alex grinned at the nervous energy about her.

"I am unafraid of a children's disease. I'm reasonably sure I had them all when I was a boy and am not overly concerned."

"Oh, that's very good, then."

Alex thought she was barely paying attention to his comments about the illness. It seemed to him as though she had asked because she ought to, not because she was actually concerned about his health. He wasn't in the least bit offended, it was just that she seemed truly distracted.

"You asked me to call, my lady?" He said it as though he was asking. It had been a strange missive to receive from a young woman that he had come to think was *not* setting her cap at him. Her demeanour now didn't lead him to think otherwise.

"Yes, my lord. I know it is a trifle irregular that I have done so, and I do hope you don't think it was overly forward of me. I've also

sent a messenger to try to locate Rathnelly, but I wasn't perfectly sure of where he is, so I'm not sure when or if he will receive the message. It is probably nothing, and I disturbed you for no reason. But the servants said it was the third message, and the knife made it seem like an escalation. And while I was loath to disturb you, I also didn't want to trouble Felicity, since she clearly has her hands full as it would seem now all three of the children have caught the dreadful illness. The servants were rightly concerned about it, and while a part of me wants to just dismiss it, I didn't think I should do so out of hand without asking someone else for an opinion. But I didn't want to send for a family member as everyone has little children, and you were already here, besides not having any children yet."

Alex stared at her. He had never witnessed the usually unflappable young woman rambling before. She finally stopped for a breath, and embarrassment flooded her face. He tried to ignore how adorable she looked as well as the sudden impulse to offer her a comforting embrace.

"I think you might have to add a few details, my lady. You said a knife and a note was found?"

It hardly seemed possible, but her colour deepened. Still, she lifted her chin and met his gaze, almost defiantly.

"Perhaps, we ought to have a seat and I could ring for tea."

It was such a female thing to say. Alex tried to keep his amusement from showing. There was obviously something serious afoot, but the girl wanted to take tea. The threat didn't seem to be completely immediate, though, so he supposed a short delay while she composed herself wouldn't be the end of the world. He could tolerate it, but he did hope she would get to her point soon.

"It would seem you have been left in charge of Rathnelly while the duke and duchess are otherwise engaged." Alex tried to prompt her as the silence descended between them. He had noticed on previous occasions that Lady Graciela did not mind silence, but today she was clearly ill at ease.

"It hardly seems right, does it?" She asked the question with self-deprecating humour in her tone, but her chin rose as though she were proud of being in charge.

Alex didn't want to find it appealing; there was nothing to do about it but ignore the sensation. He was at least glad to see that Lady Grace had regained her equilibrium. As a gentleman, whatever the situation, he couldn't leave the girl to fend for herself. It would be far less burdensome if she weren't having hysterics. Again, he fought his amusement. Lady Grace had never given him reason to think she was subject to irrationality, but she seemed to be close to it that day.

The tea trolley soon arrived, and Lady Graciela poured as skilfully

as any well-bred young lady. The familiar ritual seemed to steady her nerves, and she smiled at him over the rim of her cup.

"I do apologize for the manner in which you were greeted, my lord. And I'm sorry for bothering you with this little problem. But it would seem there is someone making threats toward my family. Or rather, toward Rathnelly, who is now my family, so it is one and the same."

Alex frowned. "What sort of threats?"

"Well, that's the thing and why I wanted to discuss it with someone. They are vague and not exactly threatening, but they are disconcerting just the same. There have now been three notes pinned about the property. The first two were at the stables. This morning's note was pinned to the kitchen door, held in place by a large knife. I wasn't here for the first two. And apparently, the staff did not think the notes alarming enough to tell either the duke or duchess. But today's message, which included the knife and being attached to the house as it was, seemed to be more serious. I happened upon them when they were discussing what was to be done."

"And you thought to involve yourself?"

"What else would you have me do? Ignore it altogether? While a part of me would like to do so, that doesn't seem to be a productive solution. It's entirely possible that I'm making a mountain out of a mole hill and ought to have just waited for Rathnelly's return. But the knife gave me serious pause. So, I thought to ask for the opinion of what I hope is a discreet, level-headed third party." The pointed expression upon her face amused him once more. He nodded at her.

"You did the right thing, my lady. I will look into it."

Lady Grace glared at him, and Alex was once again reminded of a kitten trying to guard the house. The angry expression didn't sit well on her pixie-like features.

"I did not ask you here to take care of the matter for me, my lord. This is my family. I will look after it. I wanted your opinion on the matter, not your interference."

"As a gentleman, I cannot allow you to involve yourself in a potentially dangerous situation," Alex countered.

"How do you think to stop me, my lord?" She asked the question with such a sweet smile that it almost belied the steel in the tone of her question.

"Let us not be at loggerheads," Alex finally answered, realizing she wasn't wrong. There was really nothing he could do to stop her. And she was right to care for her family. "The thing is, I am concerned."

She stared at him expectantly with her head tilted slightly, like an inquisitive little bird, or like the kitten he kept thinking of in her

presence. She was obviously waiting for him to elaborate, and he grew uncomfortable.

"I'm not certain if you'll recall when I was here the night before the children took ill, I mentioned my need for a new steward." He watched as Lady Grace's intelligent gaze sharpened upon his face, and she nodded as though in agreement. "Rathnelly was kind enough to arrange for two of his clerks to present themselves to me before he rode off to Town. They both were acceptable, and I hired one of them."

Lady Graciela continued to nod as she listened attentively but didn't add anything to the conversation. A small frown of concentration had formed on her forehead. Alex found it charming but ignored the thought and continued.

"He has turned out to be quite an asset already, and I'm surprised Rathnelly would so willingly part with him. But that is not the point. While we were discussing my future plans, Nicholas mentioned something that he didn't think was important, and I didn't really give heed to at the moment, but now, added to this, I think you are right to see those notes as a threat to Rathnelly."

This was the point that he hadn't wanted to bring up with a young lady. He doubted she would be able to cope with the possibility, and he had no patience for hysterics. But much to his surprise, Lady Grace merely sat there and watched him for a moment.

"And you are confident that you have fitted the pieces of your puzzle together correctly? Is it not perhaps possible that whatever your Nicholas has told you is completely unrelated and there is nothing to be concerned about in the least?"

"It's possible, but not probable," he answered with a small smile, surprised by her frowning but thoughtful nod.

"Very well, my lord. You had better tell me what your concern is and together we can figure out what is best to be done."

Alex stared at her for a brief moment, wondering how to reply. He had never confided in a woman since he had grown old enough to stop thinking every maid in the house was his maternal substitute. That had probably been when he had been sent away to school when he was six years old. He wasn't certain he would be able to do it. But she was gazing at him expectantly, and he really did owe it to Rathnelly to do whatever he could.

"My apologies, my lady, but I am struggling with the rightfulness of telling you."

Now, the young woman's gaze turned cool.

"You mean, you doubt a female can grasp the depth of whatever the problem might be, my lord?" Her tone was as cold as the deepest part of his lake in early summer. "I had hoped that wasn't the case but

suspected as much. If it is concerning the estate or some sort of business dealings, would you rather I have the steward or butler called for?"

"You aren't going to have me tossed out on my ear for my disrespect?" Alex was only half joking. It was obvious he had offended the young woman's sensibilities.

"As tempting as that might be, I am the one who summoned you, and if there truly is a matter of concern for my sister's household, I cannot allow my own feelings to sully the waters. It needs to be dealt with. And if you are too lily livered to deal with a woman, I am willing to step aside. I shan't leave the matter be, mind you, but I won't force you to deal with me."

Alex couldn't prevent his estimation of her from growing. He had never met a woman like her. He bowed to her.

"My sincere apologies, Lady Graciela. I shouldn't have implied it couldn't be discussed with you. If you are certain we are sufficiently private here, I will tell you what I can, and you can decide who you think we ought to inform, and how best to proceed."

She barely blinked and didn't nod or speak; she merely stared at him while she waited for him to elaborate. Her proud bearing filled him with admiration even as his respect for her grew. She didn't gloat over getting her way. And she didn't seem terribly interested in whatever he had to impart. She seemed merely resigned to take care of whatever needed to be done.

"It would seem your brother-in-law is a secret business titan," he began. Again, Lady Graciela merely gazed at him without speaking, but one of her eyebrows did rise slightly as though questioning where he might be going with his statement. Alex cleared his throat and continued.

"I had heard about his horse breeding enterprise the last time I purchased a horse. I had no idea it was something he didn't wish to be known. But according to my new steward, Rathnelly is involved in various enterprises and wishes to keep the matter hidden from Society."

Again, Lady Grace didn't add anything. Alex was beginning to grow uncomfortable with her silence. He carried on, nonetheless.

"Anyhow, according to my new steward, there have been several instances of people trying to learn more about the duke's activities and attempts to interfere with his progress."

"This is interesting, but I'm surprised. If Rathnelly wants to keep it so very secret, why would his former clerk share such details with you? I also don't see what this has to do with the threats here. What makes you think the two are connected? I would think, if this clerk has told you about the many attempts to learn of the duke's ventures,

Rathnelly himself must also know and has surely looked into it. And wouldn't the servants have known to inform the duke about these threats, no matter how idle they seemed? Did your man tell you who the duke suspects is behind whatever the troubles might be?"

Alex was impressed with the intelligence of her questions. But there were so many of them. He answered the simplest one first. "Nicholas said the duke suspects it might be your cousin that is behind it."

Now the lady finally reacted. "My cousin? Lord Griffiths, do you mean? What would he have to do with anything?"

"There is also some suspicion of Lord Bertram being involved."

"So, which one is it, my lord? Griffiths or Bertram? And why would either of them have any wish to interfere with Rathnelly's interests?"

"This is only supposition, but Nicholas implied they both might have issues with your family," Alex began, hesitating to continue.

He watched as Lady Graciela puzzled over the matter. He had never thought to admire intelligence in a woman, but it was obvious this one had enough going on in her upper works. She didn't seem confused by his statements, merely puzzled as to their veracity.

"I suppose it is possible that Lord Griffiths could have a grudge against my father, or rather my little brother, but what would that have to do with Rathnelly? I don't know much about it, but I know there was some sort of *contretemps* between Lord Bertram and Mr. Northcott, but again, that has nothing to do with Rathnelly. I would say it is quite a stretch to connect the two."

"Apparently, Rathnelly doesn't think so."

"I still do not understand why the servants wouldn't have known about this if it is so well known that *you* have been informed. In my experience, the servants always know everything. Is it unusual that Nicholas has spoken so freely with you? And why would Lord Griffiths be going after Rathnelly in the first place? If he has something against my family, wouldn't it make more sense to interfere with Sherton or Glendale?"

She poured him another cup of tea.

Alex was surprised by her calm acceptance as well as her intelligent rationalizations. He had never had such a conversation with a woman before. He felt himself rearranging his thoughts on the subject. Perhaps, he ought to try to be a little more open to the realization that females could be intelligent creatures. It was becoming increasingly evident to him that, at the very least, the woman sitting before him certainly was.

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Alex took a sip of the hot beverage, not quite comfortable with

the delicate cup, despite his years of training. He always tried to avoid taking tea with ladies, as it felt quite ridiculous to him. But he found he didn't want to offend the lady any more than he already had.

"As it stands, not all my information came from Nicholas. It has been talked about among the London clubs that your cousin, Lord Griffiths, has been seeking a way to cause trouble for your family ever since your brother was born. I first heard about it as an *on dit* some time ago. It's ridiculous, considering it isn't your family's fault Lord Griffiths is no longer the heir. Or rather, it isn't your family's fault that he set so much store in *being* your father's heir."

"It is a trifle embarrassing, though, isn't it? That Society would be talking about something so petty? My parents can be blamed in a certain way, I suppose, but they are thrilled about Augustus's arrival. It wasn't like Lord Griffiths ever paid any attention to us. If he had visited and grown attached to the estate rather than the income he was obviously anticipating from it, I might find a little more sympathy for him in my heart. But, as you say, if he is seeking to cause trouble for us, I will happily stick a spoke in his wheel. What can you tell me about it?"

Alex was, once again, impressed with her reaction. He had half expected her to be in hysterics by now. Which, given what he knew about her already, was foolish. She never seemed to get worked up about anything. Even when she seemed upset about something, she managed to keep it contained, not taking to her smelling salts or throwing a fit as he had witnessed from his mother and her companions. Save the rambling he'd witnessed when he'd first arrived at the estate, which was, under the circumstances, a perfectly respectable reaction, Lady Graciela Sherton seemed all but completely unflappable.

Chapter Eleven

Grace held herself as still as possible so as to not betray the agitation she felt inside. The handsome gentleman was just like any man she had encountered. Even her lovely brothers-in-law had a tendency toward thinking women couldn't possibly be as wise or intelligent as they themselves were. She tried not to hold it against them, as she could tell they were trying to overcome that particular tendency. But she could also tell that Lord Sterling was very surprised by her lack of drama over what he had told her, despite the little scene she had enacted when he had first arrived.

Did he think she was going to faint over his revelations? What a nincompoop. Gracie almost shook her head but offered him a gentle smile instead and grinned on the inside over the confusion written upon his face.

He was as handsome as the devil and socially adroit, but it took all Grace's effort to not rail at the man. Of course, she wanted to hear every detail about whatever this plot might be, especially if it might involve her cousin and if other members of her family might be affected.

While Grace, for the most part, didn't like to exert herself any more than was absolutely necessary, she certainly wasn't one to shirk her duties. She was here, at her sister's invitation, and now she must take charge of protecting her sister's family, since Felicity was in no position to do so at the moment.

"Please, tell me whatever you can, my lord," Grace finally managed to utter after a deep breath produced sufficient calm within her breast.

He still looked a little uncertain, but Lord Sterling finally launched into his explanation.

"In answer to your question about why my new steward has told me any of this, Rathnelly told him he might, since it was my finding out about his horse breeding venture that caused him to hie away to London so suddenly. I cannot tell you why he wishes to keep it such a secret, but the fact that I found out by happenstance disturbed him."

Gracie nodded. "Even I am probably not aware of the full extent of his empire, my lord, but I am aware of his desire for secrecy. I believe it stems from his understanding of Society's view of such matters and his concern that it might affect his children's acceptance by the *ton*."

She could see that Sterling wished to scoff over the thought that

the children might be shunned for such a reason, but after a moment's thought, she could see him accept that there was probably an element of truth to it. He reluctantly nodded.

"Anyhow, since it is such a secret, anyone asking around about his ventures seems to cause alarm," Sterling continued.

Grace nodded and grinned. That had certainly been her sister's experience with the duke.

"And so, you have caused alarm, then?" Grace prodded.

Sterling finally seemed to relax enough to grin at her, and Grace had to wish that he hadn't. *Why does he have to be so blasted good looking?* It was a distraction they certainly didn't need during this conversation.

"It would seem so," he replied. "But I was the least of their worries, as it turns out. Someone else has been sniffing around and trying to cause problems for Rathnelly."

"What sorts of problems besides these strange, vague notes?"

"One of your brother-in-law's ventures includes a fleet of ships. He lost one a few months ago. At the time, it was thought that it went down in bad weather, which it did, but further investigation showed that the ship had also been tampered with, making it far more susceptible to the storm they encountered."

Grace felt misgivings intrude. She considered herself to be sufficiently intelligent and competent, but this might be beyond her ken. "Was there loss of life?" Her voice was a little smaller than she would have liked as she asked the question.

"Blessedly, no. But he did lose revenue."

"It seems like a great deal of effort with no guarantee of success."

"What do you mean, pray tell?"

"Well, if it was merely tampered with, who was to say they would run into a storm? And what about the risk of death? It was a wicked and cowardly thing to do with no guarantee that it would do any harm to Rathnelly in the least."

Grace couldn't interpret the assessing expression on the earl's face as he regarded her but also didn't put too much effort into it, as she was too wrapped up in worrying about Rathnelly's businesses.

"And furthermore, how are we to know if there aren't other acts of sabotage out there just waiting to cause losses? Did you not say this could, perchance, be directed at the house of Sherton rather than Rathnelly? Why, there could be traps awaiting any number of people I care about at this moment."

Agitation welled in her chest and pushed against her teeth, making her want to rant a little longer. Knowing it would be a senseless waste of time, Grace knitted her lips together and held silent for a moment. She could no longer sit docilely though and got to her

feet to pace about the room. She took some deep breaths and regained her composure but didn't bother to resume her seat. From across the room, she turned to stare at Lord Sterling.

"You are certain about this information, my lord?"

"I am, unfortunately."

"And do you know for certain that Rathnelly is aware?"

"As I said, he is, in a roundabout way, the source of most of the information I've just told you."

Grace nodded. "Yes, of course, I'm rather thinking out loud." She nibbled on her lip with worry. "Do you have any idea if Rathnelly has warned the rest of my family?"

"I cannot comment on what he might have done in the past as to telling them about the troubles he was facing, but I would think, considering he wished to keep all the information to himself, that he wouldn't have done so. And the information about your cousin and the potential link to it being about your family rather than Rathnelly specifically, might be new. It is likely safe to assume Rathnelly has also heard the rumours, but I can't be certain he has. He does rather like to keep to himself. Additionally, according to my new steward, it was only last week that Griffiths was seen in the area asking untoward questions."

"Ah, I see," Grace said, her voice faint. After clearing her throat, she carried on briskly. "I appreciate you sharing these details with me. In light of all this information, it would seem I do need to be concerned about the messages that are being left." Grace stopped and pondered for a moment. "I cannot decide whether or not it best to tell Felicity." She turned to the earl as though to ask his opinion but almost laughed over his dubious expression. Clearly, he didn't want to be tasked with making that decision. "I think we ought to try to find out a little bit more about the matter before we bring my sister into it. She is consumed with caring for the children. I don't think she needs anything more to worry about at the moment. If we run into any sort of difficulty, we can always consult with her then. Or, as you say, perhaps we can safely leave it with Rathnelly sooner rather than later. I have already sent a messenger for Rathnelly about the children's illness. I wonder if I ought to send another or hope he comes home straightaway from the first."

"I would think this a more pressing issue than a childhood illness."

"A proud papa might not think so," Grace countered with a smile before continuing. "That will be our first order of business, then. We must send further word to the duke. And I suppose we ought to contact Wexford and Eastwood as well. And definitely Mr. Northcott, if you think this might involve his nemesis."

“I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, but you do have a way with words, my lady.”

Finally, Grace found a moment of levity and laughed along with the earl. It would seem they had both needed the outlet, as the mirth was far in excess of what was called for.

“Shall we adjourn to His Grace’s library? Somehow, that seems both appropriate and inappropriate all at once.”

At Sterling’s questioning glance, Grace elaborated.

“Appropriate to sort the matter in his library, but somehow I feel as though it would be an invasion of his privacy. I have never gone in there without him present.”

“Not even for a book?”

It took everything in her not to roll her eyes at the daft man.

“I haven’t visited so many times that I have been in need of reading material while here,” she answered patiently.

Sterling shrugged, making her grit her teeth, but then he added, “I was merely funning. I can understand your sentiment about feeling as though you were violating his privacy. I feel similarly. Is there, perhaps, another room with a large table or desk we could use, and the servants could bring us the supplies we need?”

No longer finding him quite so irritating, Grace offered him a genuine smile. “That is quite a brilliant idea. There are probably several rooms that could be used, even one of the dining rooms. But there is a room that I have surmised might be used for games and such if Rathnelly was hosting a route or some similar entertainment. There are a few tables in the room. And there might even already be a supply of paper there. Let us see if it will suit our needs before we ring for help from the housekeeper.”

Without awaiting his reply, Grace hurried from the room, eager to get started. Before long, they were both seated at a table with a pile of paper between them while a footman was setting up another table with refreshments for their enjoyment.

“Thank you, Samuels, that looks like it will be plenty to keep us satisfied for quite some time.”

“Very well, my lady. I will return in a while to see if you could use anything else. And Mr. Carter will be nearby if you should require anything in the meantime.”

Grace believed quite firmly in acknowledging the servants’ efforts, but she was so determined to get to the bottom of the dilemma, she could barely acknowledge the footman’s words. With a smile and nod, she dismissed the young man, grabbing a pen and examining the nib quickly before dipping it in the ink and getting started.

Since, in her estimation, Wexford was the most powerful person

of her acquaintance, she determined to write to him first. A part of her felt badly for involving him in even more family complications, as she knew he'd had to intervene in both Vigilia and Felicity's dramas. But since the man seemed to thrive on straightening out his family's dilemmas, Grace didn't think he would mind. In fact, she could imagine he would give her a set down if she didn't approach him first. That thought made her smile a little.

"Does this amuse you, my lady?"

Sterling's incredulous question made Grace laugh a little. "Not in the least." She scoffed. "But I am writing to Wexford, and thinking about him does amuse me at times. It cannot be helped, I'm afraid."

Her lips twitched again as Sterling stared at her with incredulity. "Wexford amuses you," he repeated.

"I should probably ask that you not tell him that if you are ever in conversation with him, but do you not find him a trifle amusing?"

"Not in the least," he replied with a smile, turning her words back on her.

"I guess the thing that I find amusing about the dear man might be a little off putting for some. He is rather intense, is he not?"

"Quite," Sterling replied as he glanced back at his own paper.

"To whom are you writing first?" Grace thought to ask.

"Rathnelly."

"Oh good. I probably should have thought of him first, but somehow, it was my first instinct to call on Wexford."

"I'm surprised it wasn't your father," Sterling commented. Grace couldn't detect any censure in his tone, but heat flushed her cheeks all the same.

"It strikes me that timing might be an important factor to consider in this matter. If there is already a saboteur out there wreaking havoc on Rathnelly's interests and making threats against him and perhaps other members of my family, we cannot sit about contemplating what to do. Action is required immediately, whether we like action or not."

Now Sterling was frowning at her as though he couldn't fathom what she was on about. Grace's colour deepened even further by the warmth radiating off her skin. She tried to explain herself.

"I would far rather be at home curled up in my bedroom with a lovely novel from the lending library. I have tried to convince my mother that I never wish to leave home, but she is terribly insistent that I must enter Society and wed, that otherwise I will be an embarrassment and an encumbrance for my brother."

"While I find that strangely fascinating and would like to know more about why you feel that way, I don't see how that answers why you are writing to Wexford before your father."

Grace's cheeks tightened with her discomfort. "I suppose that was a little off topic. My parents are quite preoccupied with my young brother. And my father, while a very dear man, will be quite burdened with this information. It will take him considerable time to decide how he feels about it and what he thinks ought to be done. I don't think waiting for his response would benefit the situation. In fact, every moment we would wait would be a moment wasted, I'm afraid. If I start with Wexford, action can begin immediately. I will, of course, inform my father, but this will allow for a solution to be underway while my father contemplates it. And in this case, especially, if there is truth to it being Griffiths causing the trouble, I am afraid it will hurt my father, and he will feel responsible for whatever problems have arisen. That will weigh him down further and impede our progress. I would far rather be able to quickly tell him that it is in hand, and he needn't worry about it. Knowing Wexford as I do, that is quite likely in my estimation."

It was quite a speech, and Sterling's stare didn't lessen. Nor did the heat in her cheeks. Embarrassment nearly swamped Grace. She had been rambling on and on. Lord Sterling likely thought her a fool.

"You have a great deal of confidence in Wexford's abilities," he finally said.

"I do, in fact. Don't you?" Gracie frowned.

Sterling shrugged a little and offered her a crooked smile. "I don't have the same kind of experience with him as you do."

"What kind of experience do you have?"

"Well, very little, to be honest. We're acquaintances rather than friends. I have seen him in action in the House. He preserves a formidable air."

"Yes, that's true. I think I would probably be terrified of him, if I hadn't met him when I was a child and he was making an effort to be appealing."

Sterling tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "What did he do to try to be appealing to a little girl?"

"He brought Felicity and me candies and dolls."

"Did you not already have dolls?"

"Not ones like these." Grace could still remember the thrill of this strange adult man bringing them such a gift. "And the candies were very special, too. We so often had biscuits and other treats, but candies were quite rare in our young lives. We didn't have many adults in our lives, either. The servants, of course, and our parents. But we don't have aunts and uncles as many children do. We had Grandmother Sherton, of course. But she was an intimidating lady who didn't quite approve of us as children. She grew much kinder as we grew older. And was very generous to us girls in her death. But

Wexford's gifts were the first of their kind in our young lives. We were probably even a little old for the dolls. But he did a remarkable job of impressing us."

Sterling's smile was still on the disbelieving side, so Gracie continued. "He also took the time to talk to us. That might not sound so interesting or surprising, but he knew to sit in a chair so he wasn't towering over us, and he had all the right questions to get us chattering away. And he sat there and listened to us. You probably know he has a sister, so he knew what he was doing. The fact that he actually did it has always endeared him to me. He didn't have to. He's a busy and powerful man. Two little girls are really nothing in his realm. But he took the time to greet us and get to know us, even though we were really quite insignificant, even within our immediate family. Our parents were so caught up in the three older girls and their Seasons and trying to get them married off. And then it happened quite suddenly that both Rosabel and Hilaria wed, and Vigilia not long afterward. Felicity and I were left to our own devices quite a bit in that time period. We had a wonderful governess, of course. But, yes, Wexford's attention was welcome and gained him two quite devoted sisters-in-law."

"That is quite evident, my lady. I haven't known you long, but these are the longest speeches I have ever heard you make on any subject. You are usually quite sparing in your conversations. It reveals quite a bit that you would go into such detail about him. And I must admit that I will never look at him quite the same in the future."

Grace laughed. "Make no mistake, Wexford could peel the wallpaper off the walls with his glare if he thought we were out of line. But he considers us to be his, and he will do whatever is necessary in his seemingly limitless power to look after what is his."

"Well, I should let you get back to writing to him, in that case. I can see that you expect him to accomplish great things in this matter."

"I do," Grace answered simply before fixing him with a stare. "But that isn't to say that we needn't do the rest. Everyone involved needs to be contacted and apprised of the situation. And maybe they have information that's important to the matter. Mr. Northcott, for example. He is wise in all sorts of matters. And of course, Father might have something to add. I probably shouldn't have been so quick to think he would take too long. Seeing as it's his cousin we suspect of causing trouble for the family, there might be some insights Father could share." She paused and sighed. "Really, I ought to stop chattering and get on with writing to everyone. If we send out the messengers immediately, we could have answers back before long."

Chapter Twelve

Alex stared at the woman. It was as though she had transformed right in front of his eyes. He never would have thought she would be capable of such thought. And she was the funniest combination of humble and bossy. As though she didn't really think she was much of anything on one hand, while on the other she was fully confident in her abilities. He found himself wondering what sort of impression it would make on a young girl when her father's heir was suddenly born into the family.

He rather suspected that Ladies Grace and Felicity might have been woefully neglected by their parents in favour of the young viscount. It seemed to have affected them each quite differently but also profoundly. Alex was becoming increasingly convinced that Grace was nothing like any Society woman he had ever encountered.

Not to say he had any intention of pursuing the attraction he felt toward her. He had every intention of allowing his line to die out. Lady Grace's family situation just went to prove that inheritances could lead to disaster. Alex's family situation had only ever proven that pain was its own legacy. His would end with him.

But he would enjoy working out this problem with Lady Grace. It was sure to be a challenge. Still, if Rathnelly were to return and fix it himself, which would probably be ideal, Alex ought to keep his distance from the fascinating young woman, he reminded himself, even as he had trouble keeping his eyes away from her as she leaned over her paper. The way she pulled her lips into her mouth and scrunched her nose in concentration did strange things to his insides. She glanced up at him, and their eyes met for a brief moment. Suddenly, he was a schoolboy again as his chest fluttered with unfamiliar feelings. It wasn't completely unpleasant. She turned her attention back to her letter.

He followed her lead and set to work composing the messages that would need to be sent out to gather the required information, or rather to alert the involved personages. They couldn't very well traipse around the country investigating for themselves. Not only would that be scandalous, it would also take far too long. They didn't even know what Rathnelly might have already put in place nor if Griffiths were actually the one causing the trouble.

While the thought of conducting an investigation did fill him with a sense of purpose and excitement, he couldn't see his way clear to do it. For one thing, by coming here and telling Lady Graciela what he

knew, he had involved the lady and couldn't now un-involve her. For another, if the roles were reversed, Alex would expect Rathnelly to do everything he possibly could to sort the matter for him. Upon further reflection, though, Alex feared the duke might resent his putting his nose into his affairs. He gave voice to his thoughts.

"Rathnelly might not thank us for spreading this information."

"We aren't spreading it. We're seeking assistance. From family. It's not as though we're taking out an advertisement in the papers or telling the *ton's* worst gossips. Since he ought to have known this was a possibility, he ought to have left us better prepared. If he takes exception to our actions, he'll have a tough time explaining himself to my sister, I'm certain."

"Do you not think she might perhaps have words for us for not involving her?"

Her furrowed brow let Alex know that he had touched upon her worries. She tapped the end of her quill against her chin as she thought. Finally, she sighed.

"I don't know, my lord."

Her expression turned beseeching and Alex's heart clenched as though he wished to solve the dilemma for her. It was the strangest sensation he had ever experienced.

"She will be irritated that she wasn't included. But what are we to do? She has locked herself into the nursery with the children. We can't very well tell her with the children there. And surely, she is worried enough about them. Ought we to add to her burdens by telling her about this? It would be ideal if your letter to Rathnelly reaches him swiftly and he returns immediately and sorts the matter for himself. If that doesn't happen, we need to do the best we can on our own. If Her Grace leaves the nursery, we will tell her immediately." She again looked at Alex as though she hoped he could solve the matter for her but with a little shake of her head, she carried on as she shrugged. "I just wouldn't feel right revealing this in earshot of the children, you see."

Alex nodded. "Yes, of course. But I still think your sister will have words for us."

Suddenly, she grinned. "I'm certain you are quite correct."

He really didn't want to think she was darling. He turned his attention back to his letter writing, frowning over how to word the message, and was surprised when, from the corner of his eye, he watched as Lady Grace sanded and folded her letter before sealing it with a bit of wax.

"You're finished already?"

His question made her blink in confusion.

"Already? I thought I had tarried needlessly," she replied with

another grin as she glanced at his half-written paper. "It would seem I am far more experienced at letter writing than you are. Do not let it trouble you. I think it is a female expertise." She paused while her expression shifted. "It's better that you are writing to Rathnelly, but I can message everyone else. Since they're members of my family, at least those we are planning to contact initially, they might question matters more if it is you who writes." She paused again and a droll expression flitted across her face as her lips twisted in wry amusement. "Except, of course, for the male impulse to question a woman's intellect right at first."

Alex's cheeks warmed at her teasing expression but before he could issue an excuse or apology, she carried on as though she hadn't even said anything.

"I think, though, that my two brothers-in-law and my father will get over that reasonably quickly and concentrate on the message rather than the messenger, so it shan't truly be a problem. Once these are on their way, we'll need to plan out the rest of our strategy."

Alex couldn't decide how he felt about her managing ways. They were equal parts amusement and irritation. He had never witnessed a woman taking charge in such a way. He wondered if it were unique to this one woman, but then shook his head as he remembered that the duchess had locked herself in the nursery with the sick children. Perhaps, it was merely a Sherton characteristic.

He tried to focus on his own paper, scratching out a few more sentences in an attempt to explain to Rathnelly what had happened with the notes and why he was sticking his nose in the other man's affairs. Before he could finish, Lady Grace was sanding another letter, and Alex was beginning to feel uncomfortable, as though he were somehow in competition with her. It was a ridiculous thought and he tried to dismiss it, but it still interfered with his completion of his letter. With a frown, he hunched over the table and did his best. Despite his concerted efforts, he was just finishing his one letter as the interfering baggage completed her third. She stood from the table and strode briskly toward the bell pulls. Almost no time passed before the butler responded, as though he had been hovering nearby to await their summons.

Alex supposed he probably had been. The servants of a great house always knew when things were afoot.

"We will need your swiftest men experienced in taking messages, Mr. Carter," her ladyship was explaining. "Four of them," she added. "And one of them needs to be able to track down His Grace, as we aren't certain of his direction at the moment."

The butler barely blinked. "Very well, my lady, but His Grace is most likely nearly at the London townhouse by now."

Lady Graciela nodded with a smile. "I know that was his initial destination, but we have reason to believe that he may have had to go elsewhere first, so I would prefer your most experienced man for that message."

Alex suddenly thought of something. "There is also a possibility he might stop at my estate at some point, too. So, if your man can't find him in London, he can leave word at Lakewood."

"Of course, my lady, my lord, I will have the four attend you here within moments."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

Alex hid his smile as he watched the experienced older servant nearly melt under the girl's gentle smile. Clearly, she was used to getting her way. Alex wanted to be irritated but found it was impossible when she turned that smile on him. He attempted to ignore it.

"Lord Sterling." She drew his attention back to her with her soft voice. "I am afraid my abilities end with what we have accomplished thus far. Or rather, not my abilities, as I am certain that I am able and capable of any matter of things. But I haven't a clue as to what we ought to do next, so I am going to have to rely on you to tell me what to do. I intend to do whatever is necessary, but if you have some ideas or experience in the matter of investigating who might be threatening my family, I would love to hear them."

Amusement welled in him once more; he wanted to be irritated with her but found it was impossible.

"I cannot say that I have a great deal of experience investigating anything, either, but I did just discover that my steward was robbing me, so I suppose I have a little."

Her mouth opened in a gratifyingly shocked yet admiring sort of expression, and Alex felt his chest puff out with pride. He shook his head at his own ridiculous behaviour then cleared his throat and refocused his attention. He was just about to tell her his plan when the butler returned with the four footmen and grooms who would be carrying their messages.

The four men accepted the seriousness of their commission and left almost as soon as they had entered. Alex rather thought they were considering the young woman as their queen. He puzzled over wondering why she inspired such devotion. He thought it was likely her gentle demeanour. She seemed so innocent and pleasant, but then would look at one with such direct strength. He could see that it could be powerfully influential. As evidenced by the four servants doing their utmost to accomplish their assignments.

As soon as the footmen had left and they were alone once more, Lady Grace turned to him full of expectant inquiry. It made Alex's

mind empty for the briefest moment. His face heated as he remembered what they had been discussing before the interruption.

“Yes, of course,” he stammered at first. “I would like to speak with the mill overseer and Rathnelly’s clerks. They may not be comfortable telling me anything, but hopefully they can at least give me an idea of who else has been asking questions.”

As he spoke, he watched her gaze narrow into a glare, even though he couldn’t fathom why.

“I gather you meant to say that is where *we* will gain more information, right, my lord?”

Alex’s mouth opened to reply, but he wasn’t sure what to say to her. Finally, he merely nodded. He supposed she was already involved. He would have to put up with her tagging along with him for now. Anticipation filled him at the thought.

“I cannot guarantee they will wish to be open with me if you are present,” he finally explained.

“Of course, you cannot, my lord. On the other hand, they might be more willing to share with me than with you, seeing as how I’m the duchess’s sister.”

Alex didn’t want to admit to her that it was a possibility he hadn’t thought of, but there was some truth to her words.

“Shall we go there now?” was all he could be bothered to say. He was relieved to note that her smile wasn’t in the least bit mocking or triumphant as she sallied forth from the room ahead of him, calling out for Mr. Carter to have Sterling’s gig brought around.

“Thank you, my lord,” she murmured as he handed her up into the gig. Alex’s hands lingered on her waist. As usual, her soft voice affected Alex. He would have thought he would have begun to grow inured to it, but the affliction seemed to be worsening rather than improving. He wondered if he would survive the coming days.

Chapter Thirteen

Their visit to the wool factory hadn't been nearly as informative as Grace had hoped. It turned out that someone asking questions about Rathnelly's business interests was a common enough occurrence. When Felicity had first moved to Rathnelly, the duke had even been suspicious of her curiosity. It was fortunate that the duke's suspicious nature had his employees on high alert, so they took note of everyone asking questions, but their notes hadn't been terribly detailed.

Yes, a stranger had been asking questions. And yes, he had been seen in the village on the days that the notes had been left on the estate, including the third note with the menacing knife, but no one knew who the stranger was. She supposed that made sense. He was a stranger. But she wished they could find someone who knew who it was. Their search that afternoon had thus far been fruitless.

Dusk was falling when Lord Sterling guided his horses up the long drive to Rathnelly House and Gracie was torn with indecision.

"Do you think Her Grace would be able to speak with me for a few minutes?" The earl's question interrupted Gracie's troubled, circling thoughts. She turned to stare at him in the lowering light.

"I cannot be certain, my lord. She did say she would not emerge from the sickroom. But we could ask."

"I just cannot be comfortable leaving the household unprotected."

Gracie's eyebrows rose at his words. "Well, there are a significant number of large, almost imposing footmen and grooms about the property, so I wouldn't say we'd be left unprotected. But if you're offering to stay, I'm sure you will be made welcome."

She rather thought she might have embarrassed him by her assumption, but then he nodded. "If we are to continue with our investigation on the morrow, it might be best for me to be close by."

Grace nodded even though he was no longer looking at her as he drove into the stable yard. Grooms hurried forward to take control of the horses and help Gracie down from the high seat. Sterling waited to offer her his elbow and escort her into the house.

"Mr. Carter, has Her Grace left the nursery wing yet?"

"No, my lady, she has not, but she had the footman leave a message for you."

Gracie frowned. She hadn't told Felicity very much about what was going on as of yet. She hadn't wanted to alarm her, since she was so preoccupied with the sick children. Grace should have known her

inquisitive sister would still be able to keep herself informed.

Dearest Gracie,

You ought to have told me there were things afoot. I trust you are taking care of it to the best of your ability, but do keep me informed. If Lord Sterling is going to continue helping you, you may invite him to stay the night if you think it best. The servants will see to it.

The children and I send our love,

Duchess of Rathnelly

Gracie chuckled over her sister's commands. Felicity certainly enjoyed being duchess when it suited her to be commanding.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter, for the message. I will write a reply shortly," she said to the waiting servant before turning to the waiting earl. "Since she is still sequestered with the children, I don't think you can speak with her, but she has had the forethought to extend an invitation to you, if you'd like to dine with me and remain here tonight, the household will see to your needs."

Embarrassment made her palms damp, but Grace didn't flinch as she extended the invitation to the earl. While she hadn't been wrong about them being sufficiently protected by the sheer volume of servants upon the estate, somehow having the earl close by would make her feel safer. But now, she was struggling with unwanted feelings for the handsome man, and that made her highly uncomfortable.

The way he had learned to listen to her was attractive in itself. It had been irritating that morning when he was clearly taken aback with her assumption that she would be involved in finding a solution to the threats against Rathnelly. *Had he really thought he would be able to tell me about it and then carry on his merry way without including me in finding a solution, especially after I had asked him for his help?* That had been a ridiculous thought from the moment it had formed in his mind. She couldn't stand for that. But now, he seemed to have overcome that flaw.

Not knowing from whence the threats came made them all the scarier and a chill remained in Grace's heart. And therefore, the earl's presence would be welcome. Even though she would like to think she was well able to handle the oversight of the household and even the investigation, having another source of authority was a comfort.

She ought to have spoken with Felicity. If she had not had the mystery upon her hands, despite her sister's words to stay away, she would have stopped by several times throughout the day. Not doing so was rather unfeeling of her. Or so it might seem to her niece and nephews.

But there were only so many hours in the day, and Grace had been intensely busy between conferring with the housekeeper and butler on matters pertaining to keeping Rathnelly running smoothly and traipsing about the countryside to ascertain whether there truly was a threat to her sister's family.

Mr. Carter interrupted her tumultuous thoughts. "I can have a footman show you to a room, my lord."

Grace smiled her gratitude at both men. "I will meet you for a meal shortly, my lord. I will send a note to my sister and tidy myself up a bit before then."

Lord Sterling bowed to her before following the footman, not arguing or offering any further words. Grace closed her eyes for a moment but all she could see was the handsome earl staring back at her. It was the most disconcerting experience of her life. If only it didn't seem so one sided, Grace might reconsider her desire to remain a maiden aunt to her sister's children. But from what she could tell, Lord Sterling merely considered her the pesky sidekick he was forced to drag along with him because Grace had insisted, and he was too much of a gentleman to gainsay her. With a shake of her head, Gracie stepped into a receiving room that she knew had a well supplied desk.

My dearest Duchess, she began the note with a twist of her lips. Felicity would surely enjoy the greeting.

My apologies for not discussing these matters with you before setting into action. As you can imagine, I didn't think you would want them discussed in front of the children. And I didn't want to worry you. But yes, Lord Sterling is here and will remain until at least tomorrow. Have you heard from Rathnelly?

*Your loving sister,
Graciela*

As though she had anticipated Grace's letter and had her response ready in advance, Felicity's reply was delivered to her while she was changing for supper.

My dear Gracie,

I did hear from Rathnelly. That's who told me everything, you naughty sister. You are correct, you should have been the one to do so, but I understand why you didn't, so all is forgiven. I am in agonies of curiosity, though, as you can surely imagine. And will have dozens of questions for you when next we can meet in person.

*As always, your sister,
Felicity*

Grace was relieved by her sister's response. At least, she didn't

have to worry about how or what to tell her now. She was, however, somewhat aggrieved that the duke hadn't thought to reply to her messages. Since she was the one trying to investigate who might be looking to cause him trouble, you would think he would be a little more informative. She ought to be relieved that all seemed to be well with him, and she was, but she was still a little annoyed.

A glance at the clock told her she should hurry if she didn't want to keep Alex waiting for her. She lifted her skirt so as to not trip over it as she ran up the stairs, still thinking about Rathnelly. She supposed he thought he was invincible. It seemed to be a trait of every duke she was acquainted with. And as such, she supposed he didn't consider that anyone would be worried about him. But at least he had sent word to someone. Now, she could turn her full attention to the matters at hand rather than concerning herself with his physical welfare.

Gracie dithered over what to wear, nearly giving herself and her maid fits as she pondered what should have been a simple decision. When one considered what she had been facing that day, the matter of which frock to don for the evening meal was less than minor. But after having argued with Alex at various points throughout the afternoon, she wanted to put her best foot forward that evening. There were a few points throughout the day when she had been torn between wishing to rail and scream at the obtuse man one moment and a strong desire to throw herself into his arms another. It was uncomfortable, to say the least. So, she figured for the evening, if she were feeling perfectly confident in her attire, perhaps her behaviour would follow suit. It would not do to cause a scene in her sister's home.

Not that it was acceptable to do so anywhere, she reminded herself with a grin as she left her room and descended to the receiving room.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she excused as she entered the room and found the earl already present.

"Not at all," he answered promptly. "I have just arrived myself." He looked at her with admiration, which brought heat to Gracie's cheeks. "Did you have a rest? You appear much restored."

"Thank you, my lord, that's kind of you to say. But no, I had to confer with my sister and the servants."

"Did you speak to the duchess? Are the children well?"

"Well, I didn't actually speak with her, more like we exchanged words. Written words. But yes, the children are doing well, it would seem. And so is the duke. I don't have any details, but it was he who told Felicity what is happening."

The expression of sympathy upon the man's face almost made

Grace give in to the mess of emotions that were tumbling around within her. But she was made of sterner stuff than that, she reminded herself as she took a deep breath and held everything in.

“It was better that he told her. There’s a good chance she might already know more than we do. I should have thought to ask her before we went haring off about the county.”

“If she told you she knows what has taken place, wouldn’t she have also told you what else she might know?”

Grace had to accept the wisdom of his words as she took his elbow and followed the butler to the breakfast room where they were to dine. She was relieved the servants weren’t putting them in either of the dining rooms, as they were both much too large for two people.

Nerves tightened her stomach at the thought of the evening looming before them. She would have to entertain the sociable earl for at least the length of the meal. Even if she were to excuse herself for being too tired, she would have to make it through however many courses the kitchens sent up. Grace couldn’t remember what arrangements she had made with the housekeeper for that day, but she was certain the staff would have prepared well for their noble guest.

Blessedly, the courses passed quickly. The wine flowed along with the conversation and before she knew it, Grace was taking her leave of the gentleman, excusing herself for the night due to her fatigue and the early morning they had agreed to the next day. They would be riding over to the next village to inquire there about the mysterious stranger the clerks had told them had been lurking about, since no one closer by had been able to identify him. It was going to be an early morning, and if she was going to be on horseback, she would need all the energy she could muster.

Before she took her leave of the earl, though, there was one thing she just had to say.

“Thank you for helping me with this matter, my lord. I know you feel honour bound as a gentleman to do it, but I still appreciate all that you’re doing for my family. And I truly appreciate that you haven’t said anything disparaging about anyone, despite the fact that it very well could be a relative of mine that we are seeking.”

To her surprise, the nobleman laughed. “None of us can choose our relatives, so it would be unseemly for me to speak ill of yours.”

Without another word and the briefest curtsy, Grace fled from the room.

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful. It would be a lovely day for their ride. Whenever she forgot about the ugliness behind why they were conducting the investigation, she found herself enjoying herself immensely. Grace never would have thought she

could enjoy exerting herself. She didn't think it was the company alone that pleased her, but that certainly didn't hurt.

Their destination was the Horse and Hare Inn about twelve miles west of Rathnelly. She wasn't a bruising rider, so they had to allow enough time for rest stops as well as any likely places they might ask about strangers in the neighbourhood.

Grace wondered how that would go over if they were also considered strangers. She wasn't highly hopeful about their prospects of success.

It had taken far longer than Alex had thought it ought to for them to arrive at their destination, and Gracie was starting to see conspiracy wherever she looked by the time they rode into the innyard. For all she knew, there could be multiple threats against both Rathnelly and the Sherton family. All they had thus far been able to confirm was that there was someone poking around in Rathnelly's affairs, and they had been told that one of his ships had been damaged in some way that appeared suspicious. But after asking about strangers in every village they rode through, Grace felt suspicious of everyone she laid eyes on.

"What made you choose this destination, my lord?" she had asked about a mile out.

Alex had laughed. "I've stopped there before. It seems the perfect place for anyone of a shady disposition to stay. It's big enough to be able to maintain a degree of anonymity but small enough to not see a great deal of traffic."

By the time their destination had come into view, Grace was well and truly tired of their travels. She ought to have requested they drive instead of ride. But Alex had seemed so delighted when she had agreed the night before that she hadn't wanted to change her mind.

The innkeeper, when they finally saw him, was quite suspicious of their questions until Alex offered him some coins. Then his tongue loosened quite nicely, even though he didn't think he could help them.

"The only fellow who's been stayin' here regular like is Mr. Griffin. But he's not a nobleman, my lord. Barely respectable he is. So, I donna think he's the one yer lookin' for, my lord. But iffn' you want to see for yerself, he's in the taproom right now."

That wasn't his name, of course, but since Grace had met her father's cousin a few times, she would recognize his red, jowly face if he was in the taproom. She looked at Alex with what she knew was probably a wild stare for the briefest moment. Just as she could recognize Lord Griffiths, he would surely recognize her. And while a part of her wanted to confront the rotter immediately, if it were him causing trouble for Rathnelly, they needed far more information before they could actually accuse him of anything. Still, they had to verify his presence, so they thanked the innkeeper and strolled toward

the taproom as calmly as possible. One glance was all it took for Grace to recognize her relative. Before she could think what to do, Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her outside.

“What is happening, my lord?” She kept her voice down but still demanded answers. Without saying anything, Alex gestured at the open window. Gracie’s eyes widened, and she allowed him to pull her in that direction.

“Fire would do the most damage, I expect.”

Grace had never liked her cousin’s voice. It seemed both cold and uncultured. But in that moment, it sent a deep chill down her spine that even having Alex’s hand gripping her arm wasn’t able to dispel.

What was he thinking to set fire to? And how could they stop him? Should they just confront him now and put an end to it? But short of shooting or maiming him, how could they stop him? Questions chased themselves around in her head, and she didn’t hear anything else as the blood whooshing in her ears drowned everything out until Alex was pulling her again. She started to frown at him but before she could state her mind, he manoeuvred her into a space between the inn and a shed then leaned over her.

All thought fled her mind as she gazed up at him. Was he about to kiss her? Would she let him? It was highly inappropriate besides inexplicable timing, but Grace rather thought she might like to see what it was like.

But then the buzzing in her ears had cleared, and she heard Griffiths’ voice nearby. He had come out into the stable yard. Alex was saving her from being seen by the man, not trying to kiss her. Grace wanted to shrivel up and die of mortification that she had even thought otherwise. She only hoped he had no idea what she had been thinking.

Grace felt isolated and alone in that moment, despite Alex’s close presence. Turning her mind from her embarrassment over what she had thought Alex was going to do, she thought about her family and their lack of reaction. What would become of them if they couldn’t stop Lord Griffiths before he caused a scandal of epic proportions?

Or before she caused one herself by her wild adventure with Alex Sterling.

“Come along. We’ll leave the groom to follow him and hire one of the inn’s ostlers to help him. We ought to head back to Rathnelly and see what else your sister might know.”

Because they didn’t need to make any stops except to rest the horses and themselves, they made good time returning. To her surprise, Felicity didn’t seem terribly surprised to find out what they knew but she didn’t have anything else to add. There had been word from the rest of the family, though.

Wexford's message had apparently arrived first, as she would have expected, but Grace actually would have thought it would have arrived even earlier. Grace was surprised he hadn't come in person. If she were being perfectly honest with herself, she would even admit to being disappointed he hadn't ridden in to save the day as she had expected. But she would never admit that out loud to anyone. Especially when Alex responded the way he had.

"Did you not say the great Duke of Wexford would save all?" Sterling's tone was a little snide as he asked the question.

"Well, I am certain I didn't word it quite like that, but yes, I did expect a great deal from His Grace. But this letter does not imply that we cannot expect his help."

"It just tells us that he will do his best from where he is and not come here in person."

"His best from where he is might very well be better than our present best, so don't discount him just yet." Grace hated that she sounded so defensive, but there was little she could do about it as she swallowed her disappointment and tried to keep the panic from welling up in her throat. After a slight cough, she continued. "At least, we know that he is now on the alert and looking into any abnormalities in his spheres of influence. He will be sure to let us know if he learns anything. The fact that he hasn't been aware of anything untoward is comforting, at least, as that tells me disaster has not befallen my eldest sister's family. It is to be hoped that Eastwood will write similarly. And perhaps, Mr. Northcott will have helpful information with regard to Lord Bertram."

When they returned from another venture the next afternoon, there was, in fact, a letter from Lord Eastwood and Hilaria awaiting them.

Dear Lady Graciela:

Thank you for the information. We are not aware of any such threats against us but will look into it accordingly. There is no question that Felicity and Rathnelly will be well able to sort out the matters shortly. You need not trouble yourself with it. If you find you cannot cope, do write again.

With love,

Hilaria and Eastwood

Grace stared at the paper in her hand and wondered if she were perhaps having a nightmare. She and Alex had just returned from a long drive back from Uxbridge where they had found out that Lord Griffiths had indeed stayed at that village's inn on the dates the clerks had thought someone had been spying on the warehouse. It was also

there that they were able to confirm his association with Mr. Northcott's nemesis, Lord Bertram. Grace's sister, Vigilia, had been able to enlighten them discretely about that connection when she wrote to them.

It had been clever of Griffiths to stay further away and thus be even less likely to run into any Barringtons. But it also confirmed for Grace that their cousin was a threat to her family. And Hilaria was dismissing it as though it were a figment of her imagination or something she couldn't cope with.

"Of course, I can cope." She nearly spat the words before she had recollected herself. "My apologies, my lord." She offered him a smile that felt a trifle wan. "I think I had been expecting a different response."

"Did you?" he asked with a frown. "I recall you saying that you hoped Eastwood would send a similar message as Wexford. Seems to me they are quite the same."

Grace had to breathe through her mouth to get over her anger with the earl for being so obtuse.

"They aren't the same in their flavour, my lord, but that's neither here nor there. As you say, I am relieved that they, too, are unaware of any current damages. I do hope they will follow through and look, though."

"You don't think they will?"

"The letter struck me as being a little dismissive." Grace tried to explain without allowing her hurt feelings to show.

She must not have been successful. Alex's large, warm hand closed over her elbow for a moment, and he squeezed gently as though to somehow impart strength to her. Grace's heart turned over, and she almost pulled away but managed to keep her reaction as contained as possible. It was remarkably kind of him, considering he was usually somewhat dismissive himself.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day, savouring his morning coffee, Alex couldn't get her out of his mind. That shouldn't be surprising, considering they had been spending nearly all their time together for days. But if he didn't consciously think about not wanting her there, he found that he quite enjoyed her presence, and that would never do.

Would allowing my family line to continue really be such a bad thing?

The thought came out of nowhere like a blow to Alex's midsection. He had to stop and take deep breaths to stem the wave of panic that washed through him at the thought of taking a wife and having children. He had vowed to himself from a very young age that he would never consider doing so.

And yet, here he was, thinking that Lady Grace wouldn't be such a bad addition to his life. In fact, despite the gravity of the matter they were trying to take care of together, he found her mostly sunny disposition to be delightful. Even though he continued to assure himself that the only reason he was remaining was a sense of obligation toward Rathnelly, if he were being perfectly honest with himself, he had to admit that the real reason was the young lady herself, rather than the intrigue they were investigating.

And then there was that moment in the innyard when he had almost kissed her. Alex could only hope she was too innocent to realize what he had almost done.

The investigation was fascinating, though. It would be even more so if not for the few times he had seen expressions on Grace's face that showed how truly pained she was by the threat to her family. Alex could imagine that it would be devastating to find out a family member, even a distant one, was out to harm your loved ones. He was really quite impressed with how she managed to contain her hurt feelings most of the time. He would have thought her quite uncaring, if not for those few unguarded moments.

But he had seen them. And his heart yearned for the young woman who was trying so valiantly to look after everyone, despite her continued insistence that she was the lazy and boring member of her family. From what he knew of her now, that couldn't possibly be true.

So, what was he going to do when they solved the problem or when Rathnelly came back and solved it for them? Could he really go back to his solitary existence? Whether the duke allowed him to invest in any of his schemes or not, Alex was beginning to suspect that it wouldn't be enough to keep him satisfied any longer. He had never

witnessed the sort of loyalty Lady Grace obviously had toward her family. Alex wanted that for himself. A loyal companion to weather life's storms with.

If that meant he would have to accept the possibility of there being heirs, Alex was beginning to think that was a risk he was willing to take. If Lady Grace were their mother, Alex was reasonably certain his defective genes wouldn't be able to mess them up too much.

Now, he just had to convince the lady to take a chance on him.

If only it were that easy. He cringed as he remembered a conversation they had endured the previous morning before they set out on another round of investigative calls.

"You are probably hoping we will be entrapped into marriage."

She stared at him, her expression revealing that she was waiting for him to laugh because surely, he must be jesting. But the expression on his face must have told her he was serious. Fury like he'd never seen gracing her face before appeared to sweep through her, and she forced a laugh.

"That doesn't sound the least bit comfortable, my lord. I have no particular interest in having a husband, but I can assure you the very last thing I want is a husband by entrapment."

Alex knew, even as he was doing it, that he shouldn't be goading her so. The poor woman had done everything possible to care for her family and assist him in the investigation he had taken on. And she had really done nothing to indicate warmer feelings for him. Certainly, nothing to warrant such an accusation. The lingering glances that had grown more frequent over the few days they had been together could arguably be attributed to their growing fatigue and not the love that was building up in his own heart. But despite his growing feelings toward her, he had still been uncertain of his intentions. Now that he was more certain, he was even more regretful. Clearly, he was daft.

When he didn't retract his words, she seemed to become defensive. *"Well, you're only sticking around because you're hoping Rathnelly will feel indebted to you."* She didn't try to hide the sneer from her voice.

Alex had been surprised by her defence. She was usually so serene, he hadn't expected her to react to his vitriol, especially not with a little of her own.

How was he to overcome that?

It had been followed by a period of silence, followed by rather icy politeness as they carried on with their questioning. Alex had missed her quite intensely, even when she was right there by his side. It was part of what had led him to accept that it was worth taking a chance on marriage. His feelings had only been reinforced when she had withdrawn her warmth. Having lost what he had barely enjoyed, he was now more determined than ever.

His circular thoughts were interrupted by a clatter at the door of

the small dining room he was seated in, breaking his fast.

“Lord Sterling,” the duchess greeted as she sailed into the room. “I wasn’t certain if you would still be here. I do apologize that I have been preoccupied during your stay.”

Alex scrambled to his feet. “Good morning, Your Grace, it’s a pleasure to see you. Does your presence outside the nursery mean the children are on the mend?”

“It does, indeed. But now, it means I can turn my attention to you and my sister. I wouldn’t want to hear that you were leading her to scandal. She is not the family member most likely to survive an adventure.”

Alex wasn’t quite sure what the woman was talking about. “Lady Grace, do you mean?”

“Yes, my lord, she is the quietest of us Sherton sisters. Grace told me some of what the two of you were doing, but now I’d like to hear it all. I am well aware that she didn’t want to go into any sort of detail while speaking through a door and trying to keep the children from thinking anything was amiss, and she rightly put very little in writing. But now that the worst is over with the children, I am consumed with curiosity.”

“Felicity!” The excited tones from the usually quiet young woman at the door announced Grace’s presence, even as she hurried into the room and threw her arms around her sister. “I’ve been so worried.”

“All is well, my dearest, at least in the nursery wing. But now, it is my turn to worry about you. Tell me instantly what have you and his lordship been up to? I couldn’t make heads or tails out of the story you were trying so valiantly to whisper through the door and your notes were barely any better. I had hoped perhaps my matchmaking had played a part, but I’ve heard from Mr. Carter that you have been traipsing all around the surrounding countryside on some sort of mission for Rathnelly. I know you said as much and even Rathnelly said something of the sort, but everything became quite muddled for me in the past few days with the children so sick, so now you must explain yourself.”

Alex watched as Grace’s mouth opened and closed while she blinked a little dazedly at her sister. It was evident the young woman was unsure where to begin. Before she managed to piece it together, there was another commotion, this time from the front of the house ensnaring the duchess’s attention.

“Is that Rathnelly?” Without awaiting an answer, she ran from the room.

After exchanging questioning glances, Grace and Alex hurried after her. Alex struggled with very mixed emotions; if it was the duke finally returned home, everything was about to change.

“Sterling,” the duke greeted sparingly, while offering a polite bow to his sister-in-law. He kept his arm around his wife, who didn’t appear ready to let go of him any time soon. “It would seem that we have much to discuss. Shall we retire to my library?”

It was worded as a question, but the way he strode off without saying anything further and without another glance toward Alex and Grace led them to receive his words in the nature of an order. After meeting Grace’s eyes briefly, Alex offered his elbow, and they followed after the ducal pair.

Despite their frosty interactions the evening before, Alex was relieved to see that it still appeared as though he could understand Lady Grace quite well. He was fairly certain she was struggling with a mixture of relief to have the duke returned and disappointment to have their investigation taken from their hands. Or perhaps he was merely projecting his own feelings onto her.

When they reached the library, it was to find Rathnelly seated comfortably behind his large desk, the same one that Grace and Alex had chosen not to use earlier. Finally, the gazes they exchanged were filled with laughter as they likely both remembered their earlier choices.

“Would you care to enlighten my wife about your whereabouts over recent days?” the duke asked. That was hardly the way Alex had expected him to introduce the tricky subject.

Alex was about to stammer out a reply when Grace stepped forward. He shouldn’t have been surprised. Despite her belief that she was indolent, he knew she was unable to allow others to feel discomfort. What did surprise him was the censorious expression upon her face.

“First, Your Grace, I think you ought to explain yourself. We have sent countless messages to you over the past few days. Why could you not have sent word at least once? I know you sent word to your wife at least once, but surely you could have found a brief moment to answer at least one of our missives directly so that we would know you were unharmed. And a little direction would not have gone amiss.”

“Gracie, what are you talking about?” the duchess demanded.

“I do apologize, Felicity. I didn’t want you to know how concerned I was, but I had started to be worried quite sick about your husband. I couldn’t believe he would allow himself to be gone so long and not reply to a single one of my messages.”

“Dukes have a habit of forgetting they are answerable to anyone,” the duchess replied with a smirk, as she glanced between her husband and her sister.

“Well, that might be all well and good under usual circumstances,

but in this case, it was poorly done of you, Your Grace. Did you not receive any of our messages?"

"How many did you send?" The ducal couple appeared fascinated rather than apologetic. Alex was starting to find the humour in the situation, but he could see that Grace had not yet done so.

"I quite lost count, Your Grace," she replied stiffly. "There were a great many matters of concern. The children for one, and the most important, of course. But there were other matters that we could have used some assistance or guidance with, if you had seen fit to reply to a single missive."

Rathnelly finally laughed.

"You are quite right, my lady, and I do apologize abjectly. But I was detained for a time and then thought my presence would do better than a letter."

"Well, you are right on that, I suppose, but still."

Alex had to bite his lip to prevent his laughter. Clearly, the lady didn't want to concede her anger, and he didn't want it redirected toward himself.

"It would seem there is much to discuss, then. I take it you didn't think to involve my wife?"

It was clear the duchess was torn in her loyalties, wishing to take the side of both her husband and her sister. Finally, she shrugged. "I was in the sickroom until mere minutes before you arrived. Gracie cannot be blamed for not telling me whatever the big mystery is, although she did try. She told me some, but not nearly enough. I'm fairly certain they were about to fill me in just when you interrupted with your arrival."

Finally, the duke gestured toward the two chairs in front of his desk. "You had best take a seat. I have a feeling this might be a lengthy explanation."

Grace was just about to sink into the seat Rathnelly had indicated when she stood back up. "But have you stopped Griffiths, Your Grace?"

"I have, my dear, thanks to your last message."

With that, she all but slumped into the chair as though all the anxiety she had been holding in was suddenly dismissed from her being.

"That is a great relief," she said with a soft voice.

"Would someone please start explaining?" the duchess demanded, sticking firmly to her husband's side and not commenting on the fact that Alex had reached over and clasped her sister's hand.

Alex was heartened to note that Grace hadn't pulled her hand out of his grasp until he remembered that it might just be that she was too overwrought to do so. She didn't seem to be in a hurry to comply with

her sister's directive, so he began to explain.

"From what we were able to ascertain," he began as his gaze darted between the duke and duchess and the lovely lady at his side. "Lord Griffiths was determined to cause trouble for the Shertons."

"Lord Griffiths? Father's ill-mannered cousin?" Felicity questioned.

"The very same."

"Whatever for? Because of Augustus?"

"It would seem so," Alex answered gently. "It seems there is very little trouble that can be brought against your father, so he started searching for issues with your father's children. You'll be happy to know your sisters and their husbands are all leading quite uncontroversial lives, so he had difficulty finding anything to stir up. And then he happened upon Lord Bertram, who had his own reasons to be fomenting trouble for your family. Of course, some of this is conjecture. We know they are acquainted. We haven't confronted either of them, as of yet."

The duchess stared at him with a puzzled expression. "Wasn't Bertram's grudge against Mr. Ashford Northcott? What could he possibly think to accomplish by involving us in his vengeance?"

"You're right, and you might be happy to note that Lord Bertram has had a change of heart, from what we understand, and is a new man who claims to no longer hold anything against Northcott. But before he turned over his new leaf, he had sought ways to cause trouble and had discovered Rathnelly's penchant for industry. He had also crossed paths with Griffiths and passed along what little he knew."

Alex was pleased to see Rathnelly nodding along with his explanation.

"So, you and my sister have been jaunting about the countryside and found all this out? You surprise me." The duchess continued to stare, at first admiringly but then suspicion grew in her gaze. "I also wonder why."

"Would you have preferred it if he left me to fend for myself with this trouble?" Grace asked quietly. "It was not his fault, in any case. I asked him to call on me when the threat arrived."

"Threat?" Felicity's voice was fainter than usual, and she suddenly sat upon her husband's knee as though her legs had given way.

"Yes," Grace answered simply. "I'm sorry. This was one of the parts I didn't want to tell you when you were in the sickroom. And I thought perhaps you knew when you told me to invite his lordship to stay. It was the morning after His Grace had left and you had just consigned yourself to quarantine with the children. A note was pinned

to the kitchen door with a very large knife. The note itself wasn't so very threatening, but the manner in which it was left was. Then I found out that it was, in fact, the third note left. And this one felt more threatening than the first two. So, I sent for Lord Sterling, as I knew he could arrive much sooner than anyone else. He had already found out a little of the troubles Rathnelly had been dealing with, so I left him no choice but to tell me as much as he could and to help me solve the problem."

Chapter Fifteen

Gracie couldn't have explained why she couldn't keep her mouth shut. Lord Sterling had been doing a fine job of explaining everything. And surely, neither Felicity nor Rathnelly could fault either of them for their efforts or the way they had handled their investigation. She really ought to have left Sterling to defend himself if Felicity wanted to upbraid him for something.

But she couldn't do it. The earl had done them a favour and ought to be thanked, not chastised, despite the fact that she, herself, had something against him.

Her grudge toward him wasn't the sort that would lead to any kind of sabotage. And likewise wasn't for her sister's edification. She only hoped she could quickly have her trunks packed and return to Glendale as soon as possible. She could hardly stand the sight of her sister's home for all it reminded her of the time she spent with the handsome and infuriating earl.

"It would seem I owe you a debt of gratitude, Sterling," Rathnelly said, allowing Gracie to relax slightly. "Perhaps, once the ladies leave us, we can finally get around to discussing that business you had asked about before all this came up."

Grace's heart plummeted to her toes, as disappointment surged within her. She had been right. Sterling had only been helping her in order to bolster his credentials with Rathnelly. She knew it was weak, but she cast a glare toward the earl anyway, even as she slowly got to her feet.

"I'll be happy to leave you to your discussions. I could probably use a nap anyway."

"It's barely past breakfast, Grace," Felicity objected, even as she was about to follow her from the room.

Lord Sterling interrupted their departure. "If you wouldn't mind, I would appreciate a few words with Lady Grace."

Now, Rathnelly was staring at the earl as though trying to ascertain his thoughts. "It seems to me you've had plenty of time to exchange words with her ladyship over the last few days."

"Yes, but we have a few more we need to share, in order to clear up a separate matter."

Grace's face was beginning to heat, and she could no longer meet the eyes of anyone in the room. She didn't even know her own mind. Did she want to speak privately with the man or not?

She could sense Rathnelly and Felicity exchanging thoughts

without words before the duke finally said to Alex, "Very well, Sterling, you can return here to meet me after you've had your words with Grace. It would seem you and I have more than one subject to discuss when you come back," he added with a challenging glance at the earl. "It goes without saying that you shouldn't be anywhere terribly private. You've been skirting the edges of respectability long enough, I would think."

Grace wished the ground could swallow her in that moment. Her embarrassment didn't seem to have any bounds. Her head was buzzing slightly as seemingly all the blood in her body rushed into her face. She had half a mind to speak harshly in response to the duke but instead she shuffled toward the door, hoping the floor would open and swallow her, thus saving her from whatever further discomfort was before her.

"My dear, shall we adjourn to a salon, or would you care to take a stroll in the gardens?"

Grace swallowed her discomfort as best she could and tried to smile.

"A stroll in the gardens might be a nice change from what we've been doing for the past week," she managed to say as pleasantly as she could muster. She hadn't meant to sound snippy so was surprised when the earl appeared hurt by her words. Grace's immediate impulse was to apologize, but she managed to knit together her lips rather than speak.

When Lord Sterling offered her his elbow, after another hard swallow, Grace took it and went with him to the garden. It was a beautiful day; perhaps they could gaze at the clouds and forget they had ever been investigators. Grace's heart trembled. She didn't think she could ever happily return to the simple existence she had used to crave.

"Lady Grace, I owe you a sincere apology."

Grace blinked, wondering if she were imagining the warmth in his tone.

"I beg your pardon," she murmured out of habit.

Alex laughed. "No, I'm trying to beg *your* pardon."

Finally, Grace no longer felt as though her feelings were being lacerated. A smile started to spread across her lips.

"For what are you apologizing?"

"I was unbearably unpleasant to you yesterday."

"I wouldn't say it was unbearable. I did survive."

Alex returned her teasing grin. "Nevertheless, I still offer my profuse apologies, my lady."

"Profuse now, are they? You *have* changed, haven't you, my lord?"

“In more ways than you can possibly know,” he murmured, making Grace’s heart clench with excitement as he urged her toward a bench in front of the hedgerow. “Lady Grace, the past several days with you by my side have changed me. I was unforgivably rude to you yesterday, but it was only my last-ditch effort to stop myself from falling desperately in love with you. But I realize now that it was too late. The deed had already been done. I don’t deserve your forgiveness nor your love, but I’m begging you for it anyway. Please, my dear Grace, will you accept my hand and be my partner in whatever adventures we can come up with together from here on?”

Grace stared at him through the sheen of tears that had gathered in her eyes. It was the most perfect thing he could have said to her. She didn’t answer him immediately, though, so he explained himself further.

“In case I wasn’t clear, I am asking you to marry me, my darling. And no, it isn’t because I think we have been compromised into it. In fact, we were remarkably proper in our jaunting about the countryside as your sister put it. But I would still very much like to have you as my wife.”

“I didn’t think I wished to wed either, my lord. And I certainly never thought I would want to have adventures. But if they’re with you, I think I would like that very much.”

He pulled her into his arms and crushed her to his chest.

“I love you more than life itself,” he breathed, as his head started to descend toward hers.

Grace’s face flushed, and she gazed up into his smiling eyes. “I love you quite desperately too, but won’t this cause a scandal?”

Alex laughed. “There’s no one about, and you did just agree to marry me.”

“That I did,” Grace agreed and with a deep chuckle, she closed the distance between their lips, sealing their bargain in the sweetest way possible.

The End

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About the Author

While Wendy has been writing pretty much since she learned to read when she was five years old, those early efforts were really only something a mother could love. After leaving school, Wendy put writing aside and stuck exclusively to being an avid reader, happily reading any words she came across, including the cereal box.

A little over ten years ago Wendy's husband dared her to write a book instead of always having her head buried inside one. Despite her fear of not being able to accomplish such a lofty goal, to her surprise she grew to love writing nearly as much as reading. Those early efforts became her first published book – Tempting the Earl (published by Avalon Books in 2010). To the Andrews' delight, that long ago dare has become a much loved career.

Wendy is a firm believer that everyone deserves a happily ever after. Her wish is for each reader to get an escape from the everyday for a little while through the pages of her books.

When not reading or writing, Wendy can be found wandering around her neighbourhood or travelling the world with her favourite companion. She loves hearing from readers.

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